

# THE BRIGHT FACE OF DANGER



BY R. N. STEPHENS.

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"THE BRIGHT FACE OF DANGER"

"Mr. Stephens has fairly outdone himself. We thank him heartily. The story is nothing if not spirited and entertaining, rational and convincing."  
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THE  
BRIGHT FACE OF DANGER

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Robert Neilson Stephens



An Enemy to the King  
The Continental Dragoon  
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Philip Winwood  
Captain Ravenshaw  
The Mystery of Murray Davenport  
The Bright Face of Danger



L. C. PAGE & COMPANY

Publishers

200 Summer St.,          Boston, Mass.





"'I GIVE YOU ONE CHANCE FOR YOUR LIFE,' SAID I  
QUICKLY." (See page 166)

# The Bright Face of Danger

*Being an Account of Some Adventures of Henri de Launay, Son of the Sieur de la Tournoire. Freely Translated into Modern English*

By

Robert Neilson Stephens

*Author of "An Enemy to the King," "Philip Winwood," "The Mystery of Murray Davenport," etc.*

*Illustrated by H. C. Edwards*



*Boston* ♣ *L. C. Page & Company* ♣ *Mdcccciii*

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Published April, 1904

Colonial Press

Electrotyped and Printed by C. H. Simonds & Co.

Boston, Mass., U. S. A.

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*THE BRIGHT FACE OF DANGER* is, in a distant way, a sequel to “*An Enemy to the King*,” but may be read alone, without any reference to that tale. The title is a phrase of Robert Louis Stevenson’s.

*THE AUTHOR.*



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# THE BRIGHT FACE OF DANGER



## CHAPTER I.

### MONSIEUR HENRI DE LAUNAY SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY

IF, on the first Tuesday in June, in the year 1608, anybody had asked me on what business I was riding towards Paris, and if I had answered, "To cut off the moustaches of a gentleman I have never seen, that I may toss them at the feet of a lady who has taunted me with that gentleman's superiorities," — if I had made this reply, I should have been taken for the most foolish person on horseback in France that day. Yet the answer would have been true, though I accounted myself one of the wisest young gentlemen you might find in Anjou or any other province.

I was, of a certainty, studious, and a lover of books. My father, the *Sieur de la Tournoire*, being a daring soldier, had so often put himself to perils inimical to my mother's peace of mind, that she had guided my inclinations in the peaceful direction of the library, hoping not to suffer for the son such alarms as she had undergone for the husband. I had grown up, therefore, a musing, bookish youth, rather shy and solitary in my habits: and this despite the care taken of my education in swordsmanship, riding, hunting, and other manly accomplishments, both by my father and by his old follower, *Blaise Tripault*. I acquired skill enough to satisfy these well-qualified instructors, but yet a volume of *Plutarch* or a book of poems was more to me than sword or dagger, horse, hound, or falcon. I was used to lonely walks and brookside meditations in the woods and meads of our estate of *La Tournoire*, in *Anjou*; and it came about that with my head full of verses I must needs think upon some lady with whom to fancy myself in love.

Contiguity determined my choice. The next estate to ours, separated from it by a stream flowing into the *Loir*, had come into the possession of a rich family of bourgeois origin whom heaven had blessed (or burdened, as some would think) with a pretty daughter. *Mlle. Celeste* was a small, grace-

ful, active creature, with a clear and well-coloured skin, and quick-glancing black eyes which gave me a pleasant inward stir the first time they rested on me. In my first acquaintance with this young lady, the black eyes seemed to enlarge and soften when they fell on me: she regarded me with what I took to be interest and approval: her face shone with friendliness, and her voice was kind. In this way I was led on.

When she saw how far she had drawn me, her manner changed: she became whimsical, never the same for five minutes: sometimes indifferent, sometimes disdainful, sometimes gay at my expense. This treatment touched my pride, and would have driven me off, but that still, when in her presence, I felt in some degree the charm of the black eyes, the well-chiselled face, the graceful swift motions, and what else I know not. When I was away from her, this charm declined: nevertheless I chose to keep her in my mind as just such a capricious object of adoration as poets are accustomed to lament and praise in the same verses.

But indeed I was never for many days out of reach of her attractive powers, for several of her own favourite haunts were on her side of the brook by which I was in the habit of strolling or reclining for some part of almost every fair day. Attended by

a fat and sleepy old waiting-woman, she was often to be seen running along the grassy bank with a greyhound that followed her everywhere. For this animal she showed a constancy of affection that made her changefulness to me the more heart-sickening.

Thus, half in love, half in disgust, I sat moodily on my side of the stream one sunny afternoon, watching her on the other side. She had been running a race with the dog, and had just settled down on the green bank, with the hound sitting on his haunches beside her. Both dog and girl were panting, and her face was still merry with the fun of the scamper. Her old attendant had probably been left dozing in some other part of the wood. Here now was an opportunity for me to put in a sweet speech or two. But as I looked at her and thought of her treatment of me, my pride rebelled, and I suppose my face for the moment wore a cloud. My expression, whatever it was, caught the quick eyes of Mlle. Celeste. Being in merriment herself, she was the readier to make scorn of my sulky countenance. She pealed out a derisive laugh.

“Oh, the sour face! Is that what comes of your eternal reading?”

I had in my hand a volume of Plutarch in the

French of Amyot. Her ridicule of reading annoyed me.

"No, Mademoiselle, it isn't from books that one draws sourness. I find more sweetness in them than in — most things." I was looking straight at her as I said this.

She pretended to laugh again, but turned quite red.

"Nay, forgive me," I said, instantly softened. "Ah, Celeste, you know too well what is the sweetest of all books for my reading." By my look and sigh, she knew I meant her face. But she chose to be contemptuous.

"Poh! What should a pale scholar know of such books? I tell you, Monsieur de Launay, you will never be a man till you leave your books and see a little of the world."

Though she called me truly enough a pale scholar, I was scarlet for a moment.

"And what do you know of the world, then?" I retorted. "Or of men either?"

"I am only a girl. But as to men, I have met one or two. There is your father, for example. And that brave and handsome Brignan de Brignan."

Whether I loved or not, I was certainly capable of jealousy; and jealousy of the fiercest arose at the name of Brignan de 'gnan. I had never seen

him; but she had mentioned him to me before, too many times indeed for me to hear his name now with composure. He was a young gentleman of the King's Guard, of whom, by reason of a distant relationship, her family had seen much during a residence of several months in Paris.

"Brignan de Brignan," I echoed. "Yes, I dare say he has looked more into the faces of women than into books."

"And more into the face of danger than into either. That's what has made him the man he is."

"Tut!" I cried, waving my Plutarch; "there's more manly action in this book than a thousand Brignans could perform in all their lives — more danger encountered."

"An old woman might read it for all that. Would it make her manly? Well, Monsieur Henri, if you choose to encounter danger only in books, there's nobody to complain. But you shouldn't show malice toward those who prefer to meet it in the wars or on the road."

"Malice? Not I. What is Brignan de Brignan to me? You may say what you please — this Plutarch is as good a school of heroism as any officer of the King's Guard ever went to."

"Yet the officers of the King's Guard aren't pale, moping fellows like you lovers of books. Ah, Mon-



sieur Henri, if you mean to be a monk, well and good. But otherwise, do you know what would change your complexion for the better? A lively brush with real dangers on the field, or in Paris, or anywhere away from your home and your father's protection. That would bring colour into your cheeks."

"You may let my cheeks alone, Mademoiselle."

"You may be sure I will do that."

"I'm quite satisfied with my complexion, and I wouldn't exchange it for that of Brignan de Brignan. I dare say his face is red enough."

"Yes, a most manly colour. And his broad shoulders — and powerful arms — and fine bold eyes — ah! there is the picture of a hero — and his superb moustaches —"

Now I was at the time not strong in respect of moustaches. I was extremely sensitive upon the point. My frame, though not above middle size, was yet capable of robust development, my paleness was not beyond remedy, and my eyes were of a pleasant blue, so there was little to rankle in what she said of my rival's face and body; but as to the moustaches —— !

I scrambled to my feet.

"I tell you what it is, Mademoiselle. Just to show what your Brignan really amounts to, and

whether I mean to be a monk, and what a reader of books can do when he likes, I have made up my mind to go to Paris; and there I will find your Brignan, and show my scorn of such an illiterate bravo, and cut off his famous moustaches, and bring them back to you for proof! So adieu, Mademoiselle, for this is the last you will see of me till what I have said is done!"

The thing had come into my head in one hot moment, indeed it formed itself as I spoke it; and so I, the quiet and studious, stood committed to an act which the most harebrained brawler in Anjou would have deemed childish folly. Truly, I did lack knowledge of the world.

I turned from Mlle. Celeste's look of incredulous wonderment, and went off through the woods, with swifter strides than I usually took, to our chateau. Of course I dared not tell my parents my reason for wishing to go to Paris. It was enough, to my mother at least, that I should desire to go on any account. The best way in which I could put my resolution to them, which I did that very afternoon, on the terrace where I found them sitting, was thus:

"I have been thinking how little I know of the world. It is true, you have taken me to Paris; but I was only a lad then, and what I saw was with a lad's eyes and under your guidance. I am now

twenty-two, and many a man at that age has begun to make his own career. To be worthy of my years, of my breeding, of my name, I ought to know something of life from my own experience. So I have resolved, with your permission, my dear father and mother, to go to Paris and see what I may see."

My mother had turned pale as soon as she saw the drift of my speech, and was for putting every plea in the way. But my father, though he looked serious, seemed not displeased. We talked upon the matter — as to how long I should wish to stay in Paris, whether I had thought of aiming at any particular career there, and of such things. I said I had formed no plans nor hopes: these might or might not come after I had arrived in Paris and looked about me. But see something of the world I must, if only that I might not be at disadvantage in conversation afterward. It was a thing I could afford, for on the attainment of my majority my father had made over to me the income of a portion of our estate, a small enough revenue indeed, but one that looked great in my eyes. He could not now offer any reasonable objection to my project, and he plead my cause with my mother, without whose consent I should not have had the heart to go. Indeed, knowing what her dread had always

been, and seeing the anxious love in her eyes as she now regarded me, I almost wavered. But of course she was won over, as women are, though what tears her acquiescence caused her afterwards when she was alone I did not like to think upon.

She comforted herself presently with the thought that our faithful Blaise Tripault should attend me, but here again I had to oppose her. For Blaise, by reason of his years and the service he had done my father in the old wars, was of a dictatorial way with all of us, and I knew he would rob me of all responsibility and freedom, so that I should be again a lad under the thumb of an elder and should profit nothing in self-reliance and mastership. Besides this reason, which I urged upon my parents, I had my own reason, which I did not urge, namely, that I should never dare let Blaise know the special purpose of my visit to Paris. He would laugh me out of countenance, and yet ten to one he would in the end deprive me of the credit of keeping my promise, by taking its performance upon himself. That I might be my own master, therefore, I chose as my valet the most tractable fellow at my disposal, one Nicolas, a lank, knock-kneed jack of about my own age, who had hitherto made himself of the least possible use, with the best possible intentions, between the dining-hall and the kitchen.

And yet he was clever enough among horses, or anywhere outdoors. My mother, though she wondered at my choice and trembled to think how fragile a reed I should have to rely on, was yet not sorry, I fancy, at the prospect of ridding her house of poor blundering Nicolas in a kind and creditable way. I had reason to think Nicolas better suited for this new service, and, by insisting, I gained my point in this also.

I made haste about my equipment, and in a few days we set forth, myself on a good young chestnut gelding, Nicolas on a strong black mule, which carried also our baggage. Before I mounted, and while my mother, doing her best to keep back her tears, was adding some last article of comfort to the contents of my great leather bag, my father led me into the window recess of the hall, and after speaking of the letters of introduction with which he had provided me, said in his soldierly, straightforward manner :

“ I know you have gathered wisdom from books, and it will serve you well, because it will make you take better heed of experience and see more meaning in it. But then it will require the experience to give your book-learned wisdom its full force. Often at first, in the face of emergency, when the call is for action, your wisdom will fly from your

mind; but this will not be the case after you have seen life for yourself. Experience will teach you the full and living meaning of much that you now know but as written truth. It may teach you also some things you have never read, nor even dreamt of. What you have learned by study, and what you must learn by practice only, leave no use for any good counsel I might give you now. Only one thing I can't help saying, though you know it already and will doubtless see it proved again and again. There are many deceivers in the world. Don't trust the outward look of things or people. Be cautious; yet conceal your caution under courtesy, for nothing is more boorish than open suspicion. And remember, too, not to think bad, either, from appearances alone. You may do injustice that way. Hold your opinion till the matter is tested. When appearances are fair, be wary without showing it; when they are bad, regard your safety but don't condemn. In other words, always mingle caution with urbanity, even with kindness. — I need not speak of the name you have to keep unsullied. Honour is a thing about which you require no admonitions. You know that it consists as much in not giving affronts as in not enduring them, though many who talk loudest about it seem to think otherwise. Indeed this is an age in which honour

is prated of most by those who practise it least. Well, my son, there are a thousand things I would say, but that is all I shall say. Good-bye — may the good God bless and protect you.”

I had much to do to speak firmly and to perceive what I was about, in taking my leave, for my mother could no longer refrain from sobbing as she embraced me at the last, and my young brother and sister, catching the infection, began to whimper and to rub their eyes with their fists. Knowing so much more of my wild purpose than they did, and realizing that I might never return alive, I was the more tried in my resolution not to disgrace with tears the virgin rapier and dagger at my side. But finally I got somehow upon my horse, whose head Blaise Tripault was holding, and threw my last kisses to the family on the steps. I then managed voice enough to say “Good-bye, Blaise,” to the old soldier.

“Nay, I will walk as far as to the village,” said he, in his gruff, autocratic way. “I have a word or two for you at parting.”

Throwing back a somewhat pallid smile to my people, tearfully waving their adieus, I turned my horse out of the courtyard, followed by Nicolas on the mule, and soon emerging from the avenue, was upon the road. Blaise Tripault strode after me.

When I came in front of the inn at the end of the village, he called out to stop. I did so, and Blaise, coming up to my stirrup, handed me a folded paper and thus addressed me :

“Of course your father has given you all the advice you need. Nobody is more competent than he to instruct a young man setting out to see the world. His young days were the days of hard knocks, as everybody knows. But as I was thinking of your journey, there came into my head an old tale a monk told me once — for, like your father, I was never too much of a Huguenot to get what good I might out of any priest or monk the Lord chose to send my way. It’s a tale that has to do with travelling, and that’s what made me think of it — a tale about three maxims that some wise person once gave a Roman emperor who was going on a journey. I half forget the tale itself, for it isn’t much of a tale; but the maxims I remembered, because I had had experience enough to realize their value. I’ve written them out for you there: and if you get them by heart, and never lose sight of them, you’ll perhaps save yourself much repentance.”

He then bade me good-bye, and the last I saw of him he was entering the inn to drink to my good fortune.



When I had got clear of the village, I unfolded Blaise's paper and read the maxims:

1. "*Never undertake a thing unless you can see your way to the end of it.*"

2. "*Never sleep in a house where the master is old and the wife young.*"

3. "*Never leave a highway for a byway.*"

Very good counsel, thought I, and worth bearing in mind. It was true, my very journey itself was, as to its foolhardy purpose, a violation of the first maxim. But that could not be helped now, and I could at least heed that piece of advice, as well as the others, in the details of my mission. When I thought of that mission, I felt both foolish and heavy-hearted. I had not the faintest idea yet of how I should go about encountering Brignan de Brignan and getting into a quarrel with him, and I had great misgivings as to how I should be able to conduct myself in that quarrel, and as to its outcome. Certainly no man ever took the road on a more incredible, frivolous quest. Of all the people travelling my way, that June morning, I was probably one of the most thoughtful and judiciously-minded; yet of every one but myself the business in being abroad was sober and reasonable, while mine was utterly ridiculous and silly. And the girl whose banter had driven me to it — perhaps

she had attached no seriousness whatever to my petulant vow and had even now forgotten it. With these reflections were mingled the pangs of parting from my home and family; and for a time I was downcast and sad.

But the day was fine. Presently my thoughts, which at first had flown back to all I had left behind, began to concern themselves with the scenes around me; then they flew ahead to the place whither I was bound: — this is usually the way on journeys. At least, thought I, I should see life, and perchance meet dangers, and so far be the gainer. And who knows but I might even come with credit out of the affair with Monsieur de Brignan? — it is a world of strange turnings, and the upshot is always more or less different from what has been predicted. So I took heart, and already I began to feel I was not exactly the pale scholar of yesterday. It was something to be my own master, on horseback and well-armed, my eyes ranging the wide and open country, green and brown in the sunlight, dotted here and there with trees, sometimes traversed by a stream, and often backed by woods of darker green, which seemed to hold secrets dangerous and luring.

Riding gave me a great appetite, and I was fortunate in coming upon an inn at Durtal whose table

was worthy of my capacity. After dinner, we took the road again and proceeded at an easy pace toward La Flèche.

Toward the middle of the afternoon a vague uneasiness stole over me, as if some tragic circumstance lay waiting on the path — to me unknown — ahead.

## CHAPTER II.

### A YOUNG MAN WHO WENT SINGING

IT was about five o'clock when we rode into La Flèche, and the feeling of ill foreboding still possessed me. Partly considering this, and partly as it was improbable I should find the best accommodations anywhere else short of Le Mans, I decided to put up here for the night. As I rode into the central square of the town, I saw an inn there: it had a prosperous and honest look, so I said, "This is the place for my money," and made for it. The square was empty and silent when I entered it, but just as I reached the archway of the inn, I heard a voice singing, whereupon I looked around and saw a young man riding into the square from another street than that I had come from. He was followed by a servant on horseback, and was bound for the same inn. It seems strange in the telling, that a gentleman should ride singing into a public square, as if he were a mountebank or street-singer,

yet it appeared quite natural as this young fellow did it. The song was something about brave soldiers and the smiles of ladies — just such a gay song as so handsome a young cavalier ought to sing. I looked at him a moment, then rode on into the inn-yard. This little act, done in all thoughtlessness, and with perfect right, was the cause of momentous things in my life. If I had waited to greet that young gentleman at the archway, I believe my history would have gone very differently. As it was, I am convinced that my carelessly dropping him from my regard, as if he were a person of no interest, was the beginning of what grew between us. For, as he rode in while I was dismounting, he threw at me a look of resentment for which there was nothing to account but the possible wound to his vanity. His countenance, symmetrically and somewhat boldly formed, showed great self-esteem and a fondness for attention. His singing had suddenly stopped. I could feel his anger, which was probably the greater for having no real cause, I having been under no obligation to notice him or offer him precedence.

He called loudly for an ostler, and, when one came out of the stables, he coolly gave his orders without waiting for me, though I had been first in the yard. He bade his own servant see their horses

well fed, and then made for the inn-door, casting a scornful glance at me, and resuming his song in a lower voice. It was now my turn to be angry, and justly, but I kept silence. I knew not exactly how to take this sort of demonstration: whether it was a usual thing among travellers and to be paid back only in kind, or whether for the sake of my reputation I ought to treat it as a serious affront. It is, of course, childish to take offence at a trifle. In my ignorance of what the world expects of a man upon receipt of hostile and disparaging looks, I could only act as one always must who cannot make up his mind — do nothing. After seeing my horse and mule attended to, I bade Nicolas follow with the baggage, and entered the inn.

The landlord was talking with my young singing gentleman, but made to approach me as I came in. The young gentleman, however, speaking in a peremptory manner, detained him with questions about the roads, the town of La Flèche, and such matters. As I advanced, the young gentleman got between me and the host, and continued his talk. I waited awkwardly enough for the landlord's attention, and began to feel hot within. A wench now placed on a table some wine that the young man had ordered, and the landlord finally got rid of him by directing his attention to it. As he went

to sit down, he bestowed on me the faintest smile of ridicule. I was too busy to think much of it at the moment, in ordering a room for the night and sending Nicolas thither with my bag. I then called for supper and sat down as far as possible from the other guest. He and I were the only occupants of the room, but from the kitchen adjoining came the noise of a number of the commonalty at food and drink.

"Always politeness," thought I, when my wine had come, and so, in spite of his rudeness and his own neglect of the courtesy, as I raised my glass I said to him, "Your health, Monsieur."

He turned red at the reproach implied in my observance, then very reluctantly lifted his own glass and said, "And yours," in a surly, grudging manner.

"It has been a pleasant day," I went on, resolved not to be churlish, at all hazards.

"Do you think so?" he replied contemptuously, and then turned to look out of the window, and hummed the tune he had been singing before.

I thought if such were the companions my journey was to throw me in with, it would be a sorry time till I got home again. But my young gentleman, for all his temporary sullenness, was really of a talkative nature, as these vain young fellows are

apt to be, and when he had warmed himself a little with wine even his dislike of me could not restrain his tongue any longer.

"You are staying here to-night, then?" he suddenly asked.

"Yes, and you?"

"I shall ride on after supper. There will be starlight."

"I have used my horse enough to-day."

"And I mine, for that matter. But there are times when horses can't be considered."

"You are travelling on important business, then?"

"On business of haste. I must put ground behind me."

"I drink to the success of your business, then."

"Thank you, I am always successful. There is another toast, that should have first place. The ladies, Monsieur."

"With all my heart."

"That's a toast I never permit myself to defer. Mon dieu, I owe them favours enough!"

"You are fortunate," said I.

"I don't complain. And you?"

"Even if I were fortunate in that respect, I shouldn't boast of it."



He coloured; but laughed shortly, and said, "It's not boasting to tell the mere truth."

"I was thinking of myself, not of you, Monsieur." This was true enough.

"I can readily believe you've had no great luck that way," he said spitefully, pretending to take stock of my looks. I knew his remark was sheer malice, for my appearance was good enough — well-figured and slender, with a pleasant, thoughtful face.

"Let us talk of something else," I answered coldly, though I was far from cool in reality.

"Certainly. What do you think of the last conspiracy?"

"That it was very rash and utterly without reason. We have the best king France ever knew."

"Yes, long live Henri IV.! They say there are still some of the malcontents to be gathered in. Have you heard of any fresh arrests?"

"Nothing within two weeks. I don't understand how these affairs can possibly arise, after that of Biron. Men must be complete fools."

"Oh, there are always malcontents who still count on Spain, and some think even the League may be revived."

"But why should they not be contented? I can't imagine any grievances."

“Faith, my child, where have you been hiding yourself? Don’t you know the talk? Do you suppose everybody is pleased with this Dutch alliance? And the way in which the King’s old Huguenot comrades are again to be seen around him?”

“And why not? Through everything, the King’s heart has always been with the protestants.”

“Oho! So you are one of the psalm-singers, then?” His insulting tone and jeering smile were intolerable.

“I have sung no psalms here, at least,” I replied trembling with anger; “or anything else, to annoy the ears of my neighbours.”

“So you don’t like my singing?” he cried, turning red again.

I had truly rather admired it, but I said, “I have heard better.”

“Indeed? But how should you know. For your education in taste, I may tell you that good judges have thought well of my singing.”

“Ay, brag of it, as you do of your success with the ladies.”

He stared at me in amazement, then cried, “Death of my life, young fellow! —” But at that instant his servant brought in his supper, and he went no further. My own meal was before me a minute later, and we both devoted ourselves in

angry silence to our food. I was still full of resentment at his obtrusive scorn of myself and my religious party, and I could see that he felt himself mightily outraged at my retorts. From the rapid, heedless way in which he ate, I fancied his mind was busy with all sorts of revenge upon me.

When he had finished, at the same time as I did, and our servants had gone to eat their supper in the kitchen, he leaned against the wall, and said, "I am going to sing, Monsieur, whether it pleases you or not." And forthwith he began to do so.

My answer was to put on a look of pain, and walk hastily from the room, as if the torture to my ears were too great for endurance.

I was not half-way across the court-yard before I heard him at my heels though not singing.

"My friend," said he, as I turned around, "I don't know where you were bred, but you should know this: it's not good manners to break from a gentleman's company so unceremoniously."

It occurred to me that because I had taken his insults from the first, through not knowing how much a sensible man should bear, he thought he might safely hector me to the full satisfaction of his hurt vanity.

"So you do know something of good manners, after all?" I replied. "I congratulate you."

His eyes flashed new wrath, but before he knew how to answer, and while we were glaring at each other like two cocks, though at some distance apart, out came Nicolas from the kitchen to ask if I wished my cloak brought down, which he had taken up with the bag. In his rustic innocence he stepped between my nagging gentleman and myself. The gentleman at this ran forward in an access of rage, and threw Nicolas aside, saying, "Out of the way, knave! You're as great a clown as your master."

"Hands off! How dare you?" I cried, clapping my hand to my sword.

"If you come a step nearer, I'll kill you!" he replied, grasping his own hilt.

I sent a swift glance around. There was no witness but Nicolas. Yet a scuffle would draw people in ten seconds. Even at that moment, with my heart beating madly, I thought of the edict against duelling: so I said, as calmly as I could:

"If you dare draw that sword, I see trees beyond that gateway — a garden or something. It will be quieter there." I pointed to a narrow exit at the rear of the yard.

"I will show you whom you're dealing with, my lad!" he said, breathlessly, and made at once for the gate. I followed. I could see now that, though a bully, he was not a coward, and the discovery fell

upon me with a sense of how grave a matter I had been drawn into.

At the gate I looked around, and saw Nicolas following, his eyes wide with alarm. "Stay where you are, and not a word to anybody," I ordered, and closed the gate after me. My adversary led the way across a neglected garden, and out through a postern in a large wall, to where there was a thicker growth of trees. We passed among these to a little open space near the river, from which it was partly veiled by a tangled mass of bushes. The unworn state of the green sward showed that this was a spot little visited by the townspeople.

"We have stumbled on the right place," said the young gentleman, with an assumption of coolness. "It's a pity the thing can't be done properly, with seconds and all that." And he proceeded to take off his doublet.

I was sobered by the time spent in walking to the place, so I said, "It's not too late, Monsieur, if you are willing to apologize."

"I apologize! Death of my life! You pile insult on insult."

"I assure you, it is you who have been the insulter."

He laughed in a way that revived my heat, and asked, "Swords alone, or swords and daggers?"

“As you please.” By this time I had cast off my own doublet.

“Rapiers and daggers, then,” he said, and flung away his scabbard and sheath. I saw the flash of my own weapons a moment later, and ere I had time for a second thought on the seriousness of this event — my first fight in earnest — he was keeping me busy to parry his point and watch his dagger at the same time. I was half-surprised at my own success in turning away his blade, but after I had guarded myself from three or four thrusts, I took to mind that offence is the best defence, and ventured a lunge, which he stopped with his dagger only in the nick of time to save his breast. His look of being almost caught gave me encouragement, making me realize I had received good enough lessons from my father and Blaise Tripault to enable me to practise with confidence. So I pushed the attack, but never lost control of myself nor became reckless. It was an inspiring revelation to me to find that I could indeed use my head intelligently, and command my motions so well, at a time of such excitement. We grew hot, perspired, breathed fast and loud, kept our muscles tense, and held each other with glittering eyes as we moved about on firm but springy feet. We must have fought very swiftly, for the ring of the steel sounded

afterward in my ears as if it had been almost continuous. How long we kept it up, I do not exactly know. We came to panting more deeply, and I felt a little tired, and once or twice a mist was before my eyes. At last he gave me a great start by running his point through my shirt sleeve above the elbow. Feeling myself so nearly stung, I instinctively made a long swift thrust: up went his dagger, but too late: my blade passed clear of it, sank into his left breast. He gave a sharp little cry, and fell, and the hole I had made in his shirt was quickly circled with crimson.

“Victory!” thought I, with an exultant sense of prowess. I had fleshed my sword and brought low my man! But, as I looked down at him and he lay perfectly still, another feeling arose. I knelt and felt for his heart: my new fear was realized. With bitter regret I gazed at him. All the anger and scorn had gone out of his face: it was now merely the handsome boyish face of a youth like myself, expressing only a manly pride and the pain and surprise of his last moment. It was horrible to think that I had stopped this life for ever, reduced this energy and beauty to eternal silence and nothingness. A weakness overwhelmed me, a profound pity and self-reproach.

I heard a low ejaculation behind me, which made

me start. But I saw it was only Nicolas, who, in spite of my orders, had stolen after me, in terror of what might happen.

“Oh, heaven!” he groaned, as he stared with pale face and scared eyes at the prostrate form. “You have killed him, Monsieur Henri.”

“Yes. It is a great pity. After all, he merely thought a little too well of himself and was a little inconsiderate of other people’s feelings. But who is not so, more or less? Poor young man!”

“Ah, but think of us, Monsieur Henri — think of yourself, I mean! We had better be going, or you will have to answer for this.”

“That is so. We must settle with the landlord and get away from this town before this gentleman is missed.”

“And alas! you arranged to stay all night. The landlord will be sure to smell something. Come, I beg of you; there’s not a moment to lose. Think what there’s to do — the bag to fetch down, the horse and mule to saddle. We shall be lucky if the officers aren’t after us before we’re out of the town.”

“You are right. — Poor young man! At least I will cover his face with his doublet before I go.”

“I’ll do that, Monsieur. You put on your own doublet, and save time.”

I did so. As Nicolas ran past me with the slain



man's doublet, something fell out of the pocket of it. This proved to be a folded piece of paper, like a letter, but with no name outside. I picked it up. Fancying it might give a clue to my victim's identity, and as the seal was broken, I opened it. There was some writing, in the hand of a woman, — two lines only :

*“For heaven's sake and pity's, come to me at once. My life and honour depend on you alone.”*

As the missive was without address, so was it without signature. It must have been delivered by some confidential messenger who knew the recipient, and yet by whom a verbal message was either not thought expedient, or required to be confirmed by the written appeal. The recipient must be familiar with the sender's handwriting. The note looked fresh and clean, and therefore must have been very lately received.

“Come, Monsieur Henri,” called Nicolas, breaking in upon my whirling thoughts. “Why do you wait? — What is the matter? What do you see on that paper?”

“And this,” I answered, though of course Nicolas could not understand me, “is the business he was on! This is why he had need to put ground behind him. He was going on to-night. He must have stopped only to refresh his horses.”

“Yes, certainly, but what of that? What has his business to do with us?”

“I have prevented his carrying it out. My God! — a woman’s life and honour — a woman who relies on him — and now she will wait for him in vain! At this very moment she may be counting the hours till he should arrive! — What have I done?”

“You, Monsieur? It’s not your fault if he chose to get into a quarrel with you. He must have valued his business highly if he dared risk it in a fight.”

“Of course he thought from my manner that he could have his own way with me. There would be no loss of time — his horses needed rest, for greater speed in the long run. He knew what he was about — there’s no doubt of his haste. ‘Come to me at once. My life and honour depend on you alone.’ And while she waits and trusts, I step in and cut off her only hope! — not this poor young fellow’s life alone, but hers also, Nicolas! It mustn’t be so — not if I can any way help it. I see now what I am called upon to do.”

“What is that, Monsieur Henri?” asked Nicolas despairingly.

“To carry out this gentleman’s task which I have interrupted — to go in his stead to the assistance of this lady, whoever and wherever she may be!”



“‘AND NOW SHE WILL WAIT FOR HIM IN VAIN!’”



## CHAPTER III.

### WHERE THE LADY WAS

“VERY well, Monsieur,” said Nicolas after a pause, in a tone which meant anything but very well. “But first you will have enough to do to save yourself. This gentleman will soon be missed. He was in haste to go on, as you say. His servant will be wondering why he delays, and the landlord will become curious about his bill.”

“Yes, but I must think a moment. Where is this poor lady? Who is the gentleman? There may be another letter — a clue of some sort.”

I hurriedly examined the young man’s pockets, but found nothing written. His purse I thought best to leave where it was: to whom, indeed, could I entrust it with any chance of its being more honestly dealt with than by those who should find the body? The innkeeper and the gentleman’s servant, with their claims for payment, would see to that. But I kept the lady’s note.

"Well," said I, "I must have a talk with the valet. I must find out where this gentleman was going, for that must be the place where the lady is."

"But the valet doesn't know where the gentleman was going. He was talking to me about that in the stables."

"That's very strange — not to know his master's destination."

"He knows very little of his master's affairs: he was hired only yesterday, at Sablé. The gentleman was staying at the inn there. Yesterday he engaged this man, and said he was going to travel on at the end of the week. But this morning he suddenly made up his mind to start at once, and came off without saying where he was bound for. Until I told him, the man didn't know that the name of this town was La Flèche."

"And what else did he tell you?"

"That's all. He was only grumbling about having to come away so unexpectedly, and being so in the dark about his master's plans."

"You're sure he didn't say what caused his master to change his mind and start at once?"

"He said nothing more, Monsieur."

"Did he mention his master's name?"

"No, we didn't get as far as that. It was only his desire to complain to somebody, that made him

“speak to me; and I was too busy with the horses to say much in reply.”

“Then you didn’t give my name — to him or any one else here?”

“Not to a soul, Monsieur.”

“That’s fortunate. Well, we must be attending to our business. I will pay the landlord, and give him some reason for riding on. While you are getting the animals ready, I will try to sound this valet a little deeper. Come.”

Without another look behind, we hastened back to the inn.

“It’s a fine evening,” said I to the landlord, “and that gentleman I saw here awhile ago has given me the notion of riding on while the air is cool.” I spoke as steadily as I could, and I suppose if the landlord detected any want of ease he put it down to the embarrassment of announcing a change of mind. In any case, he was not slow to compute the reckoning, nor I to pay it. Then, after seeing my bag and cloak brought down, I went in search of the young gentleman’s valet. I found him in the kitchen, half way through a bottle of wine.

“Your master has not yet ridden on, then?” said I, dropping carelessly on the bench opposite him.

“No, Monsieur,” he replied unsuspectingly. He

seemed more like a country groom than a gentleman's body servant.

"I have decided to go on this evening, in imitation of him," I continued.

"Then your servant had better come back and finish his supper. It's getting cold yonder. Just as he was going to begin eating, he thought of something, and went out, and hasn't returned yet."

It was, alas, true. In my excitement I had forgotten all about Nicolas's supper, which he had left in order to see if I wanted my cloak for the cool of the evening.

"I sent him on an errand," I replied. "He shall sup doubly well later. As I was about to say, your master — by the way, if I knew his name I could mention him properly: we have so far neglected to give each other our names."

"Monsieur de Merri is my master's name, as far as I know it. I have been with him only since yesterday." He spoke in a somewhat disgruntled way, as if not too well satisfied with his new place.

"So I have heard," I said. "And it seems you were hustled off rather sooner than you expected, this morning."

"My master did change his mind suddenly. Yesterday he said he wouldn't leave Sablé till the end of the week."



“Yes; but of course when he received the letter — ” I stopped, as if not thinking worth while to finish, and idly scrutinized the floor.

“What letter, Monsieur?” inquired the fellow, after a moment.

“Why, the letter that made him change his mind. Didn’t you see the messenger?”

“Oh, and did that man bring a letter, then?”

“Certainly. How secretive your master is. The man from — from — where *did* he come from, anyhow?”

“A man came to see my master at Sablé early this morning — the only man I know of. I heard him say that he had ridden all the way from Montoire, following my master from one town to another.”

“Yes, that is the man, certainly,” said I in as careless a manner as possible, fearful lest my face should betray the interest of this revelation to me. “Well, I think I will go and see what has become of my servant. When you have finished that bottle, drink another to me.” I tossed him a silver piece, and sauntered out. Nicolas was fastening the saddle girth of my horse in the yard. An ostler was attending to the mule. The innkeeper was looking on. I asked him about the different roads leading from the place, and by the time I had got this

information all was ready. We mounted, I replied to the landlord's adieu, threw a coin to the ostler, and clattered out under the archway. From the square I turned South to cross the Loir, passing not far from the place where, surrounded by trees and bushes, the body of my adversary must still be lying.

"Poor young man!" said I. "Once we get safe off, I hope they will find him soon."

"They will soon be seeking him, at least," replied Nicolas. "Before you came out of the kitchen, the landlord was wondering to the ostler what had become of him."

"As he was to ride on at once, his absence will appear strange. Well, I'm not sorry to think he will be found before he lies long exposed. The authorities, no doubt, will take all measures to find out who he is and notify his people."

"And to find the person who left him in that state," said Nicolas fearfully.

"Well, I have a start, and shall travel as fast as my horse can safely carry me."

"But wherever you go, Monsieur, the law will in time come up with you."

"I have thought of that; and now listen. This is what you are to do. We shall come very soon

to a meeting of roads. You will there turn to the right — ”

“ And leave you, Monsieur Henri? ”

“ Yes, it is necessary for my safety.”

“ And you will go on to Paris alone? ”

“ I am not going to Paris immediately — at least, I shall not go by way of Le Mans and Chartres, as I had intended. We have already turned our backs on that road, when we left the square in front of the inn. I shall go by way of Vendome.” Montoire — where the letter had evidently come from and where therefore the lady probably was — lay on the road to Vendome.

“ And I, Monsieur? ”

“ You are to go back to La Tournoire, but not by the way we have come over. This road to the right that you will soon take leads first to Jarzé, and there you will find a road to the West which will bring you to our own highway not two leagues from home.” I repeated these directions as we left La Flèche behind us, till they seemed firmly lodged in Nicolas’s head. “ I don’t know how long it will take you to do this journey,” I added, “ nor even when you may expect to reach Jarzé. You mustn’t overdo either the mule or yourself. Stop at the first country inn and get something to eat, before it is too late at night to be served. Go on to-night as far as you

think wise. It may be best, or necessary, to sleep in some field or wood, not too near the road, as I shall probably do toward the end of the night."

"I shall certainly do that, Monsieur. It is a fine night."

"When you get to La Tournoire, you are to tell my father that I am going on without an attendant, but by way of Vendome. You needn't say anything about what you suppose my purpose to be: you needn't repeat what you heard me say about that lady, or the letter: you aren't to mention the lady or the letter at all."

"I understand, Monsieur Henri; but I do hope you will keep out of other people's troubles. You have enough of your own now, over this unlucky duel."

"It's to get me out of that trouble that you are going home. Give my father a full account of the duel. Tell him the gentleman insulted my religion as well as myself; that he tried my patience beyond endurance. My father will understand, I trust. And say that I shall leave it to him to solicit my pardon of the King. I know he would prefer I should place the matter all in his hands."

"Yes, to be sure, Monsieur Henri. And of course to a gentleman who has served him so well, the King can't refuse anything."

“He is scarce likely to refuse him that favour, at any rate. My father will know just what to do; just whom to make his petition through, and all that. Perhaps he will go to Paris himself about it; or he may send Blaise Tripault with letters to some of his old friends who are near the King. But he will do whatever is best. The pardon will doubtless be obtained before I reach Paris, as I am going by this indirect way and may stop for awhile in the neighbourhood of Vendome. But I shall eventually turn up at the inn we were bound for, in the Rue St. Honoré.”

“Yes, Monsieur, and may God land you there safe and sound!”

“Tell my father that the only name by which I know my antagonist is Monsieur de Merri. Perhaps he belonged to Montoire; at any rate, he was acquainted there.”

We soon reached the place where the roads diverge. I took over my travelling bag and cloak from Nicolas's mule to my horse, hastily repeated my directions in summary form, supplied him with money, and showed him his road, he very disconsolate at parting, and myself little less so. As night was falling, and so much uncertainty lay over my immediate future, the trial of our spirits was the greater. However, as soon as he was moving on

his way, I turned my horse forward on mine, and tried, by admiring the stars, to soften the sense of my loneliness and danger.

I began to forget the peril of my present situation by thinking of the affair I had undertaken. In the first place, how to find the lady? All I knew of her was that she was probably at Montoire, that she had been associated in some way with Monsieur de Merri, and that she now thought herself in imminent danger. And I had in my possession a piece of her handwriting, which, however, I should have to use very cautiously if at all. There was, indeed, little to start with toward the task of finding her out, but, as Montoire could not be a large place, I need not despair. I would first, I thought, inquire about Monsieur de Merri and what ladies were of his acquaintance. If Monsieur de Merri himself was of Montoire, and had people living there, my presence would be a great risk. I could not know how soon the news of his death might reach them after my own arrival at the place, nor how close a description would be given of his slayer — for there was little doubt that the innkeeper would infer the true state of affairs on the discovery of the body. The dead man's people would be clamorous for justice and the officers would be on their mettle. Even if I might otherwise tarry in Montoire un-

suspected, my insinuating myself into the acquaintance of one of Monsieur de Merri's friends would in itself be a suspicious move. The more I considered the whole affair, the more foolish seemed my chosen course. And yet I could not bear to think of that unknown lady in such great fear, with perhaps none to aid her: though, indeed, since none but Monsieur de Merri could save her honour and life, how could I do so? Well, I could offer my services, at least; perhaps she meant she had nobody else on whose willingness she could count; perhaps she really could make as good use of me as of him. But on what pretext could I offer myself? How could I account to her for my knowledge of her affairs and for Monsieur de Merri's inability to come to her? To present myself as his slayer would not very well recommend my services to her. Would she, indeed, on any account accept my services? And even if she did, was I clever enough to get her out of the situation she was in, whatever that might be? Truly the whole case was a cloud. Well, I must take each particular by itself as I came to it; be guided by circumstance, and proceed with delicacy. The first thing to do was to find out who the lady was; and even that could not be done till I got to Montoire, which, be-

ing near Vendome, must be at least two days' journey from La Flèche.

As I thought how much in the dark was the business I had taken on myself, my mind suddenly reverted to the first of the monk's three maxims that Blaise Tripault had given me, which now lay folded in my pocket, close to the lady's note.

*"Never undertake a thing unless you can see your way to the end of it."*

I could not help smiling to think how soon chance had led me to violate this excellent rule. But I am not likely to be confronted again by such circumstances, thought I, and this affair once seen through, I shall be careful; while the other maxims, being more particular, are easier to obey, and obey them I certainly will.

I rode on till near midnight, and then, for the sake of the horse as well as the rider, I turned out of the road at a little stream, unsaddled among some poplar trees, and lay down, with my travelling bag for pillow, and my cloak for bed and blanket. The horse, left to his will, chose to lie near me; and so, in well-earned sleep, we passed the rest of the night.

The next morning, when we were on the road again, I decided to exchange talk with as many travellers as possible who were going my way, in the hope of falling in with one who knew Mon-



toire. At a distance from the place, I might more safely be inquisitive about Monsieur de Merri and his friendships than at Montoire itself. The news of what had happened at La Flèche would not have come along the road any sooner than I had done, except by somebody who had travelled by night and had passed me while I slept. In the unlikelihood of there being such a person, I could speak of Monsieur de Merri without much danger of suspicion. But even if there was such a person, and the news had got ahead, nobody could be confident in suspecting me. I was not the only young gentleman of my appearance, mounted on a horse like mine, to be met on the roads that day. And besides, I was no longer attended by a servant on a mule, as I had been at La Flèche. So I determined to act with all freedom, accost whom I chose, and speak boldly.

Passing early through Le Lude, I breakfasted at last, and talked with various travellers, both on the road and at the inn there, but none of them showed any such interest, when I casually introduced the name of Montoire, as a dweller of that place must have betrayed. To bring in the name of the town was easy enough. As thus:—in the neighbourhood of Le Lude one had only to mention the fine chateau there, and after admiring it, to add:

“They say there is one very like it, at some other town along this river — I forget which — is it Montoire? — or La Chartre? — I have never travelled this road before.” A man of Montoire, or who knew that town well, would have answered with certainty, and have added something to show his acquaintance there. The chateau of Le Lude served me in this manner all the way to Vaas, where there is a great church, which answered my purpose thence to Chateau du Loir. But though I threw out my conversational bait to dozens of people, of all conditions, not one bite did I get anywhere on the road between Le Lude and La Chartre.

It was evening when I arrived at La Chartre, and I was now thirteen leagues from La Flèche, thanks to having journeyed half the previous night. Anybody having left La Flèche that morning would be satisfied with a day’s journey of nine leagues to Chateau du Loir, the last convenient stopping-place before La Chartre. So I decided to stay at La Chartre for the night, and give my horse the rest he needed.

At the inn I talked to everybody I could lay hold of, dragging in the name of Montoire, all to no purpose, until I began to think the inhabitants of Montoire must be the most stay-at-home people, and their town the most unvisited town, in the

world. In this manner, in the kitchen after supper, I asked a fat bourgeois whether the better place for me to break my next day's journey for dinner would be Troo or Montoire.

"I know no better than you," he replied with a shrug.

"Pardon, Monsieur; I think you will find the better inn at Montoire," put in a voice behind my shoulder. I turned and saw, seated on a stool with his back to the wall, a bright-looking, well-made young fellow who might, from his dress, have been a lawyer's clerk, or the son of a tradesman, but with rather a more out-of-doors appearance than is usually acquired in an office or shop.

"Ah," said I, "you know those towns, then?"

"I live at Montoire," said he, interestedly, as if glad to get into conversation. "There is a fine public square there, you will see."

"But it is rather a long ride before dinner, isn't it?"

"Only about five leagues. I shall ride there for dinner to-morrow, at all events."

"You are returning home, then?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Have you been far away?"

"That is as one may think," he replied after a moment's hesitation, during which he seemed to

decide it best to evade the question. His travels were none of my business, and I cared not how secretive he might be upon them. But to teach him a lesson in openness, I said:

“I have travelled from Le Lude to-day.”

“And I too,” said he, with his former interest.

“I didn’t see you at the inn there,” said I. “You must have left early this morning.”

“Yes, after arriving late last night. Yesterday evening I was at La Flèche.”

I gave an inward start; but said quietly enough: “Ah? — and yet you talk as if you had slept at Le Lude.”

“So I did. I travelled part of the night.”

“And arrived at Le Lude before midnight, perhaps?”

“Yes, a little before. Luckily, the innkeeper happened to be up, and he let me in.”

I breathed more freely. This young man must have left La Flèche before I had: he could know nothing of the man slain.

“There is a good inn at La Flèche,” I said, to continue the talk.

“No doubt. I stopped only a short while, at a small house at the edge of the town. I was in some haste.”

“Then you will be starting early to-morrow?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

I resolved to be watchful and start at the same time. But lest he should have other company, or something should interfere, I decided not to lose the present opportunity. So I began forthwith:

“I have met a gentleman who comes, I think, from Montoire, or at least is acquainted there, — a Monsieur de Merri, of about my own age.”

The young fellow looked at me with a sudden sharpness of curiosity, which took me back: but I did not change countenance, and he had repossessed himself by the time he replied:

“There is a Monsieur de Merri, who is about as old as you, but he does not live at Montoire. He sometimes comes there.”

Here was comfort, at least: I should not find myself among the dead man’s relations, seeking vengeance.

“No doubt he has friends there?” I ventured.

“No doubt, Monsieur,” answered the young man, merely out of politeness, and looking vague.

“Probably he visits people in the neighbourhood,” I tried again.

“I cannot say,” was the reply, still more absently given.

“Or lives at the inn,” I pursued.

“It may be so.” The young fellow was now

glancing about the kitchen, as if to rid himself of this talk.

“Or perhaps he dwells in private lodgings when he is at Montoire,” I went on resolutely.

“It might well be. There are private lodgings to be had there.”

“Do you know much of this Monsieur de Merri?” I asked pointblank, in desperation.

“I have seen him two or three times.”

“Where?”

“Where? At Montoire, of course.” The speaker, in surprise, scrutinized me again with the keen look he had shown before.

It was plain, from his manner, that he chose to be close-mouthed on the subject of Monsieur de Merri. He was one of those people who generally have a desire to talk of themselves and all their affairs, but who can be suddenly very secretive on some particular matter or occasion. I saw that I must give him up, for that time at least. Perhaps on the road next day his unwillingness to be communicative about Monsieur de Merri would have passed away. But meanwhile, what was the cause of that unwillingness? Did he know, after all, what had occurred at La Flèche, and had he begun to suspect me? I inwardly cursed his reticence, and went soon to bed, that I might rise the earlier.

But early as I rose, my young friend had beaten me. The ostler to whom I described him said he had ridden off half-an-hour ago. In no very amiable mood, I rode after him. Not till the forenoon was half spent, did I catch up. He saluted me politely, and gave me his views of the weather, but was not otherwise talkative. We rode together pleasantly enough, but there was no more of that openness in him which would have made me feel safe in resuming the subject of Monsieur de Merri. As we approached noon and our destination, I asked him about the different families of consequence living thereabouts, and he mentioned several names and circumstances, but told me nothing from which I could infer the possibility of danger to any of their ladies. It was toward mid-day when we rode into the great square of Montoire, and found ourselves before the inn of the Three Kings.

I turned to take leave of my travelling companion, thinking that as he belonged to this town he would go on to his own house.

“I’m going to stop here for a glass of wine and to leave my horse awhile,” he said, noticing my movement.

He followed me through the archway. A stout innkeeper welcomed me, saw me dismount, and then

turned to my young fellow-traveller, speaking with good-natured familiarity :

“ Ah, my child, so you are back safe after your journey. Let us see, how long have you been away ? Since Sunday morning — four days and a half. I might almost guess where you’ve been, from the time — for all the secret you make of it.”

The young man laughed perfunctorily, and led his horse to the stable after the ostler who had taken mine.

“ A pleasant young man,” said I, staying with the landlord. “ He lives in this town, he tells me.”

“ Yes, an excellent youth. He owns his bit of land, and though his father was a miller, his children may come near being gentlemen.”

I went into the kitchen, and ordered dinner. Presently my young man entered and had his wine, which he poured down quickly. He then bowed to me, and went away, like one who wishes to lose no time.

Suddenly the whole probability of the case appeared to me in a flash. Regardless of the wine before me, and of the dinner I had ordered, I rose and followed him.

I had put together his reticence about Monsieur de Merri, his having been away from Montoire just four and a half days, the direction of his journey,



and his errand to be done immediately on returning. He must be the messenger who had carried the lady's note to Sablé, and he was now going to report its delivery and, perhaps, Monsieur de Merri's answer. If I could dog his steps unseen, he would lead me to the lady who was in danger.

## CHAPTER IV.

### WHO THE LADY WAS

By the time I was in the court-yard, the messenger was walking out of the archway. By the time I was at the outer end of the archway, he was well on his way toward one of the streets that go from the square. I waited in the shelter of the archway till he had got into that street — or road, I should say, for it soon leaves the town, proceeding straight in a South-easterly direction for about half a league through the country. As soon as he was out of the square, I was after him, stepping so lightly I could scarce hear my own footfalls. He walked rapidly, and as one who does not think of turning to look behind, a fact which I observed with comfort.

If he was indeed the messenger, he must have been content with a very short rest for his horse after delivering the note to Monsieur de Merri; — must have started from Sablé as soon as, or little later than, Monsieur de Merri himself, to be in La

Flèche on the same evening that gentleman arrived there, and to be out of it again before I was, as he must have been if he reached Le Lude by midnight. Perhaps he was passing through La Flèche at the very time the duel was going on; but the sum of all was, that he could not know Monsieur de Merri was killed, and this I felt to be fortunate for me.

Another thought which I had while following him along the straight white road that day, was that if the lady could command the services of this able young fellow to bear a message so far, why could she not use him directly for the saving of her life and honour? Evidently there was a reason why mere zeal and ability would not suffice. Perhaps the necessary service was one in which only a gentleman could be accepted. But I feared rather that there might be some circumstance to make Monsieur de Merri the only possible instrument; and my heart fell at this, thinking what I had done. But I hoped for the best, and did not lose sight of the young man ahead of me.

After we had walked about twenty minutes, the road crossed a bridge and rose to the gates of a chateau which had at one corner a very high old tower. In front of the chateau, the road turned off sharply to the left. A few small houses con-

stituted such a village as one often sees huddled about the feet of great castles. A drawbridge, which I could see between the gate towers, indicated that the chateau and its immediate grounds were surrounded by a moat. The messenger did not approach the gates, nor did he follow the road to its turning. He disappeared down a lane to the right.

When I got to the lane, he had already passed out of it at the other end. I hastened through, and caught sight of him in the open fields that lay along the side wall of the chateau. Near the outer edge of the moat, grew tangled bushes, and I noticed that he kept close to these, as if to be out of sight from the chateau. At a distance ahead, skirting the rear of the chateau enclosure, stretched the green profile of what appeared to be a deep forest. It was this which my unconscious guide was approaching. I soon reached the bushes by the fosse, and used them for my own concealment in following him. When he came to the edge of the forest, at a place near a corner of the wall environing the chateau grounds, what did he do but stop before the first tree — a fine oak — and proceed to climb up it? I crouched among the bushes, and looked on.

When he gained the boughs he worked his way out on one that extended toward the moat. From

that height he could see across the wall. He took a slender pole that had been concealed among the branches, tied a handkerchief thereto, and ran it out so that the bit of white could be seen against the leaves.

“Oho! a signal!” said I to myself.

Keeping the handkerchief in its position, he waited. I know not just what part of an hour went by. I listened to the birds and sometimes to the soft sound of a gentle breeze among the tree tops of the forest.

At last the handkerchief suddenly disappeared, and my man came quickly down the tree. Watching the chateau beyond the walls, he had evidently seen the person approach for whom he had hung out his signal. He now stood waiting under the tree. My heart beat fast.

I heard a creaking sound, and saw a little postern open in the wall, near the tree. A girl appeared, ran nimbly across a plank that spanned the moat, and into the arms of my young man.

Could this, then, be the woman whose life and honour was in peril? No, for though she had some beauty, I could see at a glance that she was a dependent. Moreover, her face shone gaily at sight of the messenger, and she gave herself to his embrace with smothered laughter. But a moment

later, she attended seriously, and with much concern, to what he had to say, of which I could hear nothing. I then saw what the case was: this was a serving-maid whom the endangered lady had taken into confidence, and who had impressed her lover into service to carry that lady's message. The lady herself must be in that chateau, — perhaps a prisoner. My first step must be to find out who were the dwellers in the chateau, and as much of their affairs as the world could tell me.

The interview between the two young people was not long. It ended in another embrace; the girl ran back over the plank, waved her hand at her lover, and disappeared, the postern door closing after her. The young man, with a last tender look at the door, hastened back as he had come. I had to crawl suddenly under some low bushes to avoid his sight, making a noise which caused him to stop within six feet of me. But I suppose he ascribed the sound to some bird or animal, for he soon went on again.

I lay still for some time, being under no further necessity of observing him. I then walked back to the inn at Montoire at a leisurely pace. Looking into the stables when I arrived, I saw that the messenger's horse was gone. He lived, as I afterwards learned from the innkeeper, on another road than

that which led to the chateau. I suppose he had chosen to go afoot to the chateau for the sake of easier concealment.

The innkeeper was looking amazed and injured, at my having gone away and let my dinner spoil.

"I was taken with a sudden sickness," I explained. "There's nothing like a walk in the fresh air when the stomach is qualmish. I am quite well now. I'll have another dinner, just what I ordered before."

As this meant my paying for two dinners, the landlord was soon restored to good-nature. He was a cheerful, hearty soul, and as communicative as I could desire.

"That is a strong chateau about half a league yonder," I said to him, as I sipped his excellent white wine.

"Yes, the Chateau de Lavardin," he replied. "Strong? — yes, indeed."

"Who lives there?"

"The Count de Lavardin."

"What sort of man is he?"

"What sort? Well! — an old man, for one thing, — or growing old. Or maybe you mean, what does he look like?"

"Yes, of course."

"A lean old grey wolf, I have heard him likened

to — without offence, of course. Yes, he is a thin old man, but of great strength, for all that."

"Is he a good landlord?"

"Oh, he is not my landlord," said the innkeeper, looking as if he would have added "Thank God!" but for the sake of prudence. "No; his estate is very large, but it extends in the other direction from Montoire."

"Is he a pleasant neighbour, then?"

"Oh, I have no fault to find, for my part. One mustn't believe all the grumblers. You may hear it said of him that his smile is more frightful than another man's rage. But people will say things, you know, when they think they have grievances."

I fancied that the innkeeper shared this opinion which he attributed to the grumblers, and took satisfaction in getting it expressed, though too cautious to father it himself.

"Then he has no great reputation for benevolence?"

"Oh, I don't say that. We must take what we hear, with a grain of salt. He is certainly one of the great noblemen of this neighbourhood; certainly a brave man. You will hear silly talk, of course: how that he is a man whose laugh makes one think of dungeon chains and the rack. But some people will give vent to their envy of the great."



I shuddered inwardly, to think that my undertaking might bring me across the path of a man as sinister and formidable as these bits of description seemed to indicate.

“What family has he?” I asked, trying the more to seem indifferent as I came closer to the point.

“No family. His children are all dead. Some foolish folk say he expected too much of them, and tried to bring them up too severely, as if they had been Spartans. But that is certainly a slander, for his eldest son was killed in battle in the last civil war.”

“Then he has no daughter — or grand-daughter — or niece, perhaps?”

“Not that I know of. Why do you ask, Monsieur?”

“I thought I saw a lady at one of the windows,” said I, inventing.

“No doubt. It must have been his wife. She would be the only lady there.”

“Oh, but this was surely a young lady,” I said, clinging to my preconceptions.

“Certainly. His new wife is young. The children I spoke of were by his first wife, poor woman! Oh, yes, his new wife is young — beautiful too, they say.”

“And how do she and the Count agree together, being rather unevenly matched?”

“That is the question. Nobody sees much of their life. She never comes out of the grounds of the chateau, except to church sometimes, when she looks neither to the right nor to the left.”

“But who are her people, to have arranged her marriage with such a man?”

“Oh, I believe she has no people. An orphan, whom he took out of a convent. A gentlewoman, yes, but of obscure family.”

“I can’t suppose she is very happy.”

“Who knows, Monsieur? They do say the old wolf—I mean the Count, Monsieur,—we are sometimes playful in our talk here at Montoire,—they say he is terribly jealous. They say that is why he keeps her so close. Of course I know nothing of it. — You noticed, perhaps, that the moat was full of water. The drawbridge is up half the time. One would suppose the Civil wars were back again. To be sure, some people hint that there may be another reason for all that: but I, for one, take no interest in politics.”

“You mean the Count is thought to be one of those who are disaffected toward the King?”

“H-sh, Monsieur! We mustn’t say such things. If idle whispers go around, we can’t help

hearing them; but as for repeating them, or believing them, that's another matter. I mention only what all can see — that the Chateau de Lavardin is kept very much closed against company. The saying is, that it's as hard to get into the Chateau de Lavardin nowadays as into heaven. It's very certain, the Count has no welcome for strangers."

And yet somehow I should have to get into the chateau, and obtain private speech with the Countess, — for it must be she who had summoned Monsieur de Merri.

"In that case," said I, "they must have no visitors at all. But I recall meeting a young gentleman the other day, who was acquainted with some great family near Montoire, and, from certain things, I think it must be this very Lavardin family. He was a Monsieur de Merri."

"Ah, yes. He has stayed at this inn. It was here the Count met him, one day when the Count was returning from the hunt. The Count was thirsty and stopped to drink, and the young gentleman began to talk with him about the hounds. At that time half the Count's pack were suffering from a strange disease, which threatened the others. When the Count described the disease, Monsieur de Merri said he knew all about it and could cure it. The Count took him to the chateau, where he stayed

a fortnight, for you see, however jealous the count may be of his wife, he cares more for his hounds. Monsieur de Merri cured them, and that is how he got admission to the Chateau de Lavardin. But besides him and the red Captain, there aren't many who can boast of that privilege."

"The red Captain? Who is he?"

"Captain Ferragant. He is a friend of the Count's, who comes to the chateau sometimes and makes long visits there. Where he comes from, of what he does when he is elsewhere, I cannot tell. He is at the chateau now, I believe."

"Why did you call him the red Captain?"

"The people have given him that name. He has a great red splash down one side of his face. They say it was caused by a burn."

"Received in the wars, perhaps."

"No doubt. He has fought under many banners, it is said. Some declare he still keeps his company together, always ready for the highest bidder; but if that's true, I don't know where he keeps it, or how he does so without a loss when not at the wars. It is true, he brings a suite of sturdy fellows when he comes to Lavardin; but not enough to make what you would call a company."

"Perhaps he has made his fortune and retired."

"He's not an old man, Monsieur, though he is

the friend of the Count. He is at the prime of life, I should say. A tall, strong man. He would be handsome but for the red stamp on his face. He has great influence over the Count. They drink, hunt, and play together. In many ways they are alike. The red Captain, too, has a smile that some people are afraid of, and a laugh that is merciless, but they are broad and bold, if you can understand what I mean, — not like the wily chuckle of the Count. He has big, ferocious eyes, too; while the Count's are small and half-closed. If people will fear those two men because of their looks, I can't for my life say which is to be feared the more."

"A pleasant pair for anybody to come in conflict with," said I, as lightly as I could.

"Yes, Monsieur, and seeing that strangers are so unwelcome there, you will do well to pass by the Chateau de Lavardin without stopping to exchange compliments." With a jocular smile, the innkeeper went about his business, while I finished my dinner with a mind full of misgivings.

I rose from the table, left the inn, and walked back, by the straight road of half a league, to Lavardin, pondering on the problem before me. It was a natural feeling that I might come by an inspiration more probably in the presence of the chateau than away from it. There was a little cabaret in

the village, in full sight of the chateau gates, and just far enough back from the road to give room for two small tables in front. At one of these tables a man was already sitting, so I took possession of the other and called for a bottle of wine. I then sat there, slowly sipping, with my eyes on the chateau, hoping that by contemplation thereof, or perhaps by some occurrence thereabout, I might arrive at some idea of how to proceed. The drawbridge was not up, but the gates were closed. From where I sat, I could see the gate towers, a part of the outer wall, the turreted top of the chateau itself beyond the court, and the great high tower, which looked very ancient and sombre. But the more I looked, the more nearly impossible it appeared that I could devise means of getting into the place and to the ear of the Countess.

As I was gazing at the chateau, I had a feeling that the man at the other table was gazing at me. I glanced at him, but seemed to have been mistaken. He was looking absently at the sky over my head. I now took thought of what a very silent, motionless, undemonstrative man this was. He was thin and oldish, and of moderate stature, with a narrow face, pale eyes, and a very long nose. He was dressed in dull brown cloth, and was in all respects — save his length of nose — one of those persons

of whom nobody ever takes much note. And he in turn did not seem to take much note of the world. He looked at the sky, the house roofs and the road, but his thoughts did not appear to concern themselves with these things, or with anything, unless with the wine which he, like myself, sipped in a leisurely manner.

I dismissed him from my attention, and resumed my observation of the chateau. But nobody came nor went, the gates did not open, nothing happened to give me an idea. When I looked again at the other table, the long-nosed man was gone. It was as if he had simply melted away.

“Who was the man sitting there?” I asked the woman of the cabaret.

“I don’t know, Monsieur. He arrived here this morning. I never saw him before to-day.”

In the evening I went back to Montoire, no nearer the solution of my problem than before. Nor did a sleepless night help me any: I formed a dozen fantastic schemes, only to reject every one of them as impossible. What made all this worse, was the consideration that time might be of the utmost importance in the affairs of the imperilled lady.

The next morning I went to view the chateau from other points than the village cabaret. This time I took the way the messenger had led me, —

turned down the lane, and traversed the fields by the moat. I sat where I had hid the day before; staring at the postern and the wall, over which birds flew now and then, indicating that there was a garden on the other side. Receiving no suggestion here, I took up my station at the tree from which the messenger had shown the handkerchief. I thought of climbing it, to see over the wall. But just as I had formed my resolution, I happened to glance over the fields and see a man strolling idly along near the edge of the moat. As he came nearer, I recognized him as the long-nosed gentleman in the brown doublet and hose.

He saw me, and gazed, in his absent way, with a momentary curiosity. Angry at being caught almost in the act of spying out the land, I hastened off, passing between the rear wall and the forest which grew nearly to the moat, and to which the tree itself belonged. In this way, I soon left my long-nosed friend behind, and came out on the opposite side of the chateau.

Here I found a hillock, from the top of which I could see more of the chateau proper and the other contents of the great walled enclosure. I sat for some time regarding them, but the towers, turrets, roofs, windows, and tree tops engendered no project in my mind.



Suddenly I heard a low, discreet cough behind me, and, looking around, saw the long-nosed man standing not six feet away.

The sight gave me a start, for I had neither heard nor seen him approach, though the way I had come was within my field of vision. He must have made a wide circle through the woods.

His mild eyes were upon me. "Good morning, Monsieur," said he, in a dry, small voice.

"Good morning," said I, rather ungraciously.

He came close to me, and said, with a faint look of amusement:

"May I tell you what is your chief thought at present, Monsieur?"

After a moment, I deemed it best to answer, "If you wish."

"It is that you would give half the money in your purse to get into that chateau yonder."

At first I could only look astonishment. Then I considered it wise to take his remark as a joke; accordingly I laughed, and asked, "How do you know that?"

"Oh, I have observed you yesterday and to-day. You have a very eloquent countenance, Monsieur. Well, I don't blame you for wishing you could get over those walls. I have been young myself: I know what an attraction a pretty maid is."

So he thought it was some love affair with a lady's maid that lay behind the wish he had divined in me. I saw no reason to undeceive him; so I merely said, "And what is all this to you, Monsieur?"

"Hum! — that depends," he replied. "Tell me first, are you known to the Count de Lavardin or his principal people — by sight, I mean?"

"Neither by sight nor otherwise."

"Good! Excellent!" said the man, looking really pleased. "I dared hope as much, when the woman at the cabaret said you were a stranger. What is all this to me? you ask. Well, as I have taken the liberty to read your thoughts, I will be frank with you in regard to my own. I also have a desire to see the inside of that chateau, and, as I haven't the honour of the Count's acquaintance, and he is very suspicious of strangers, I must resort to my devices. My reasons for wanting to be admitted yonder are my own secret, but I assure you they won't conflict with yours. So, as I have been studying you a little, and think you a gentleman to be trusted, I propose that we shall help each other, as far as our object is the same. In other words, Monsieur, if you will do as I say, I believe we may both find ourselves freely admitted to the

Chateau de Lavardin before this day is over. Once inside, each shall go about his purposes without any concern for the other. What do you think of it, Monsieur? ”

## CHAPTER V.

### THE CHATEAU DE LAVARDIN

ALL that I could think was that, if genuine, the offer came as a most unexpected piece of good luck, and that, if it was a trick, my acceptance of it could not much add to the danger which attended my purpose at best. In any case, this man already had me under scrutiny. So, after some little display of surprise and doubt, I took him at his word, inwardly reserving the right to draw back if I found myself entering a trap. The man's very proposal involved craft as against the master of the chateau, but toward me he seemed to be acting with the utmost simplicity and honesty, so straightforward and free from excessive protestation he was.

He led me away to a quiet, secluded place by the riverside, out of sight of the chateau, that we might talk the matter over in safety. And first he asked me what I knew of the disposition and habits of the

Count de Lavardin. I told him as much as the inn-keeper had told me.

“Hum!” said he, reflectively; “it agrees with what I have heard. I have been pumping people a little, in a harmless way. The first thing I learned was the Count’s churlish practice of closing his gates to strangers, which forces us to use art in obtaining the hospitality we are entitled to by general custom. So I had to discover some inclination or hobby of the man’s, that I could make use of to approach him. I don’t see how we can reach him through his love of dogs, without having prepared ourselves with special knowledge and a fine hound or so to attract his attention. As for his jealousy, it would be too hazardous to play upon that: besides, I shouldn’t like to cook up a tale about his wife, unless put to it.”

“Monsieur, don’t speak of such a thing,” I said indignantly.

“No, it wouldn’t do. I can’t think of a better plan than the one that first occurred to me. As it required a confederate, I put it aside. But when I observed you yesterday regarding the chateau so wistfully, I said to myself, ‘No doubt heaven has sent this young man to help me, and that I in turn may help him.’ But I waited to make sure, watch-

ing you last night and this morning till I was convinced of your desire to get into the chateau."

It was a surprise to me to learn that I had been watched, but I took it coolly.

"The plan I had thought of," he went on, "required that my confederate should be unknown to the Count and those near him. When I find that you, who are anxious for your own reasons to enter the chateau, fulfil that requirement, I can only think the more that heaven has brought us together. It is more than heaven usually does for one."

"But what else does your plan require of me?" I asked, impatient to know what must be faced.

"You play chess, of course?" was his interrogative answer.

"A little," said I, wondering what that had to do with the case.

"Then all is fair ahead of us. Luckily, I play rather well myself. As I said just now, I have been nosing among the people — nosing is a good word in my case, isn't it?" — he pointed to his much-extended proboscis — "I have been nosing about to learn the Count's ruling passions and so forth. When you have anybody to hoodwink, or obtain access to without creating suspicion, find out what are his likings and preoccupations: be sure there will be something there of which you can avail

yourself. From the village priest I learned that, along with his fondness for hunting and drinking and the lower forms of gaming, the Count has a taste for more intellectual amusements, and chiefly for the game of chess. He is a most excellent player, and doesn't often find a worthy antagonist. His bosom friend, one Captain Ferragant, who is now living at the chateau, has no skill at chess, so the Count has been put to sending for this priest to come and play a game now and then, but the Count beats him too easily for any pleasure and the result of their games is that the Count only curses the rarity of good chess-players."

"And so you think of proposing a game with him?"

"Not exactly," said the long-nosed man, with a faint smile at my simplicity. "An obscure man like me, travelling without a servant, doesn't propose games to a great nobleman, at the great nobleman's own gates. The great nobleman may condescend to invite, but the obscure traveller may not presume to offer himself, — not, at least, without creating wonder and some curiosity as to his motives. No; that would be too direct, moreover. It would suggest that I had been inquisitive about him, to have learned that he is fond of chess. I may tell you that the Count has his reasons for imagining that

strangers may come trying to get access to him, who have taken pains to learn something of his ways beforehand. He has his reasons for suspecting every stranger who seeks to enter his gates. No; we must neither show any knowledge of him, more than his name, nor any desire to get into his house. We must play upon his hobby without openly appealing to it. That is why two of us are necessary. This is what we will do."

I listened with great interest, surprised to discover what acuteness of mind was hidden behind the pale, meek eyes and unexpressive pasty countenance of this man with the long nose.

"In an hour or so from now," he said, "I shall be sitting before the cabaret, where you saw me yesterday. You will come there, from wandering about the fields, and we will greet each other as having met casually on our walks this morning — as indeed we actually have met. You will sit down to refresh yourself with a bottle of wine, and we shall get into conversation, like the strangers that we are to each other. The people of the cabaret will hear us, more or less, and the porter at the chateau gates will doubtless observe us. I will presently lead the talk to the subject of chess. You will profess to be ardently devoted to the game. I will show an equally great passion for it. We will



express much regret that we have no chessmen with us, and will inquire if any can be obtained in the village. I know already that none can be: the priest once owned a set, but he let the village children use them as toys and they are broken up. Well, then, rather than lose the opportunity of encountering a first-class player, you will suggest that we try to borrow chessmen from the owner of that great chateau, who must surely possess such things, as no great house is ever without them. You will thereupon write a note to the Count, saying we are two gentlemen who have met on our travels, and both claiming to be skilled chess-players, and hating to part without a trial of prowess, but lacking chessmen, we take upon ourselves to ask if he may have such a thing as a set which he will allow us the use of for half a day; and so forth. We will bid the woman at the cabaret take this note to the porter; and then we have but to await the result."

"And what will that be?"

"We shall see when it comes," said the man tranquilly. I know not whether he really felt the serene confidence he showed; but he seemed to be going on the sure ground of past experience. "It will be necessary to give names and some account of ourselves, no doubt, before all is done. We shall not be expected to know anything of each other,

having only met as travellers so recently. To the Count I will call myself Monsieur de Pepicot, a poor gentleman of Amiens. As for you, is there any reason why you shouldn't use your own name? When you want to deceive anybody, it is well to be strictly truthful as far as your object will permit."

"The only reason is, that I may get into the Count's bad graces by what I may do in his house, and it would be better if he didn't know where to look for me afterwards."

"Well, there's something in that. The Count is not a forgiving man. And yet, as to his power of revenge, I know not — Well, do as you please."

"Oh, devil take it, I'll go under my own name, let come what may! I don't like the idea of masquerading."

"A brave young gentleman! Then there's no more to be said. When we are inside the chateau, it will be each of us for himself, though of course we must keep up the comedy of wishing to play chess. Meet me by chance at the cabaret, then, in about an hour."

Without any more ado, he left me. Coming forth from the concealed place a minute later, I saw him strolling along the river, looking at the fields and the sky, as if nothing else were on his mind. I presently imitated him, but went in another direc-

tion. In due time I made my way to the cabaret, and there he was, at the table where I had first seen him.

We spoke to each other as had been arranged, and easily carried the conversation to the desired point, mostly in the hearing of the woman of the cabaret as she sat knitting by the door. When it came to writing the note, the long-nosed man tore a leaf of paper out of his pocket book, and had pen and ink fetched from his lodging over the cabaret; I then composed our request in as courteous phrases as I thought suitable. The woman herself carried the note to the chateau gates, and we saw a grated wicket open, and a scowling fellow show his face there, who questioned her, glanced at us with no friendly look, took the note, and closed the wicket. We waited half an hour or so, sipping our wine and talking carelessly, till I imagined the long-nosed man was becoming a little doubtful. But just as he was losing his placidity so far as to cross one leg over another, the chateau gate opened, and a heavy, dark-browed fellow with the appearance rather of a soldier than of a servant, came out, and over to us, scrutinizing us keenly as he approached. He asked if we were the gentlemen who had written to borrow a set of chessmen. Being so informed, he said:—

“Monsieur the Count, my master, begs to be excused from sending his chessmen to you, but if you will come to them he will be glad to judge of your playing; and perhaps to offer the winner a bout with himself.”

We took half a minute to evince our pleased surprise, our sense of favour, and so forth, at this courteous invitation, — and then we followed the servant to the chateau. It was amusing to see how innocently, decorously, and consciously of unexpected honour my long-nosed friend walked through the gateway, and gazed with childlike admiration around the courtyard and the grey façade of the chateau confronting us.

A few wide steps led up to the arched door, which admitted us to a large hall plentifully furnished with tables, benches, and finely-carved chairs. It was panelled in oak and hung with arms, boars' heads, and other trophies. At the upper end of a long table, the one leaning forward from a chair at the head, the other from the bench at the side, lounged two men, whom I recognized instantly from the descriptions of the innkeeper as if from painted portraits. They were the Count de Lavardin and Captain Ferragant.

Yes, there was the “lean old grey wolf,” grey not only in his bristly hair and short pointed beard,

but even in the general hue of his wizen face; grey as to the little eyes that peered out between their narrowed slits; grey even, on this occasion, as to his velvet doublet and breeches. Though his face was wizen, the leanness of his body had no appearance of weakness, but rather every sign of strength. I noticed that his fingers seemed to possess great crunching power, and there was always on his face the faint beginning of a smile which, I thought, would heighten into glee when those fingers were in the act of strangling somebody.

As for the Captain, there was indeed a great blotch of deep red across his cheek; he was a large, powerful fellow, with a bold, insolent face, and fierce, pitiless eyes. To make his sobriquet the fitter, he wore a suit of crimson, very rich and ornate. His beard and hair, however, were black.

“You are welcome, gentlemen,” said the Count, in a harsh, thin voice. “From what part do you come?”

“From different parts,” said my long-nosed companion. “We have only met as strangers going opposite ways. I am Monsieur de Pepicot, of the neighbourhood of Amiens, travelling to Angers to see some kinsfolk.”

The Count turned to me, and I recited my name and place, adding that I was going to Paris, to see

a little of the world, and therefore journeying somewhat indirectly.

“And behold here Monsieur the Captain Ferragant, who comes from Burgundy,” said the Count, “so that we have North, West, and East all represented.”

Captain Ferragant bowed as politeness required, but he went no further. He did not seem to relish our being there. His look was rather disdainful, I thought, as if we were nobodies unfit for the honour of his company. And very soon, while the Count was saying we must stay to dinner, as there was not time for a game of chess before, the Captain walked away and out of the hall. Seeing that we were to be his guests for the day, the Count had us shown to a rather remote chamber up two flights of stairs, where water was brought, and where we were left alone together. The chamber looked out on a small part of the garden at the rear of the chateau.

“Well,” said I, washing my hands, “you have played the magician. It has been as easy as walking, to get into the chateau.”

“Will it be easy to get out again, when our business is done, I wonder?” replied Monsieur de Pepicot, gazing out of the window at the distant high wall of the garden.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, a little surprised at his tone.

“Oh, I was thinking of the manner in which the gate slammed to, after we had entered. It is a mere inanimate gate, to be sure, but it was slammed by a porter, and his manner of slamming it might unconsciously express what was in his mind. You remember, the Count was rather long in coming to a decision upon our note. If it occurred to him, after all, that we might have some design, and that people with a design would be safer inside than outside — well, I mention this only that you may know to keep your wits about you.”

“Thanks, but I see no reason to fear anything. Everything seems to be going admirably. We are assured of some time in which to attend to our affairs. While one of us is playing chess with the Count, the other will be free to roam about, — that suits me perfectly. I begin to feel really grateful for the Count’s hospitality — I almost dislike having won it by a trick.”

“Pish! He is churlish enough as a rule in the matter of hospitality — it’s only fair to win it by a trick.”

I was inwardly much excited at the near prospect of dinner, as the meal would perhaps give me a sight of the Countess. But of this I was disap-

pointed. The only people who sat down at the upper table, when dinner was served in the hall, were the Count, the Captain, my friend Monsieur de Pepicot, and myself. Elsewhere the benches were crowded with fellows who, like him that had brought our invitation, appeared as much warriors as serving men, and their number alone would have arrested notice. I now recalled how many knaves of this sort I had seen in the courtyard as I entered the chateau, but at that time I had had other things to think of.

The Count said nothing of the absence of his lady, and, as we could scarce be thought to know whether he had a Countess living, it was not for us to inquire about her. I spent my time wondering what could be her situation, and whether her not appearing had anything to do with the danger in which she supposed herself. My long-nosed friend ate very industriously, and most of the conversation was between the Count and the Captain, upon dogs and hawks and such things. When the Count addressed either Monsieur de Pepicot or me, the Captain was silent. This reticence, whether it proceeded from jealousy or contempt, seemed to afford the Count a little amusement, for he turned his small eyes on the Captain and stretched his thin



lips in a snile that was truly horrible in its relish of another's discontent.

After dinner, the Count had the chessmen brought at once, and sat down to watch us at our game. The Captain, with a glance of disapproval at the chessboard, strolled away as he had done before. I was but a moderately good player, and discomposed besides, so I held out scarce an hour against the long-nosed gentleman, who was evidently of great skill. Apparently the Count, by his ejaculations, thought little of my playing, but he was so glad when my defeat made room for him, that I escaped his displeasure. I too was glad, for now, while Monsieur de Pepicot kept the Count occupied at chess, I should be free to go about the chateau in search for its mistress. And grateful I was to Monsieur de Pepicot for having beaten me, for he might easily have left me as the victor and used this opportunity for his own purpose. I could not think it was generosity that had made him do otherwise: I could only wonder what his purpose was, that would bear so much waiting.

For appearance's sake, I watched the two players awhile: then I imitated the Captain, and sauntered to the courtyard, wondering if there might be any servant there whom I could sound. But the men lounging there were not of a simple-looking sort.

They were all of forbidding aspect, and they stared at me so hard that I returned into the hall. The Count was intent upon the game. Pushed by the mere impulse of inquiry, I went up the staircase as if to go to the chamber to which I had before been conducted. But instead of going all the way up, I turned off at the first landing into a short corridor, resolved to wander wherever I might: if anybody stopped me, I could pretend to have lost my way.

The corridor led into a drawing-room richly tapestried and furnished; that into another room, which contained musical instruments; that into a gallery where some portraits were hung. So far I had got access by a series of curtained archways. The further end of the gallery was closed by a door. I was walking toward that door, when I heard a step in the room I had last traversed. I immediately began to look at the pictures.

A man entered and viewed me suspiciously. He was, by his dress and air, a servant of some authority in the household, and had not the military rudeness of the fellows in the courtyard.

“What is it Monsieur will have?” he asked, with outward courtesy enough.

“I am looking at the portraits,” said I.

“I will explain them to you,” said he. “That is Monsieur the Count in his youth, painted at Paris

by a celebrated Italian." And he went on to point out the Count's children, now dead, and his first wife, before going back to a former generation.

"And the present Countess?" said I at last, looking around the walls in vain.

"There is no portrait of Madame the Countess."

"She was not at dinner," I ventured. "Is she not well?"

"Oh, she is well, I am happy to say. She often dines in her own apartments."

"She is well and yet keeps to her apartments?" I said, with as much surprise as I thought the circumstance might naturally occasion.

"She does not keep to her apartments exactly," replied the man, a little annoyed. "She walks in the garden much of the time. Is there anything else I may show you, Monsieur?"

He stood at the curtained entrance, as if to attend my leaving the room, and I thought best to take the hint. No doubt he had purposely followed me, to hinder my going too far.

I returned to the hall, which was very silent, the two players being deep in their chess. Somewhere in my wake the manservant vanished, and I seemed free to explore in another direction. The Countess walked much in the garden, the man had said. It

was a fine afternoon — might she not be walking there now?

Feigning carelessness, I went out a small door at the rear of the hall, and found myself in that narrow part of the garden which lay between two wings of the house, and which our chamber overlooked. This part, which was really a terrace, was separated by a low Italian balustrade from the greater garden below and beyond. I walked up the middle path to where there was an opening in the balustrade at the head of a flight of steps. But here my confidence received a check. Half-way down the steps was sitting a burly fellow, who rose at my appearance, and said:

“Pardon, Monsieur: no further this way, if you please. I am ordered to stop everybody.”

“But I am the Count’s guest,” said I.

“It is all the same. Nobody is to go down to the garden yonder without orders.”

“Orders from the Count?” I asked.

“From the Count or the Captain.”

I nearly let out my thought that the Captain had a good deal of authority at the chateau, but I closed my lips in time. To show insistence would only injure my purpose: so I contented myself with a glance at the forbidden territory — a very spacious pleasance, indeed, with walks, banks of flowers,

arbours, and alleys, but with nobody there to enjoy it that I could see — and went back to the hall.

As I could not sit there long inactive, for considering how the time was flying and I had accomplished nothing, I soon started in good faith for the chamber to which I had feigned to be going before. Once upstairs, however, it occurred to me to walk pass the door of that chamber, to the end of the corridor. This passage soon turned leftward into a rear wing of the building. I followed it, between chamber doors on one side and, on the other, windows looking down on the smaller garden. It terminated at last in a blind wall. I supposed myself to be now over that part of the house which lay beyond the closed door at the end of the picture gallery. I looked cautiously out of one of the windows, wondering how much of the great garden might be visible from there. I could see a large part of it, but not a soul anywhere in it. As I drew back in disappointment, I was suddenly startled by a low sound that seemed to come from somewhere beneath me — a single brief sound, which made my breath stop and pierced my very heart.

It was the sob of a woman.

## CHAPTER VI.

### WHAT THE PERIL WAS

It seemed to me like a sob of despair, or of the breaking down of patience, and, knowing what I did already, I quickly imagined it to proceed from the Countess in a moment when she was beginning to lose hope of Monsieur de Merri's arrival. To me, therefore, it seemed a stab of reproach.

I judged that it came by way of the window below me. So forthwith, at all hazards, sheltering myself from outside view as well as I could with the casement, I thrust my head out over the sill, and said in a low tone:

“Madame.”

I waited for some moments, with a beating heart, and then called again, “Madame.”

I thought I heard whispering below. Then a head was thrust out of the window — a woman's head, soft haired and shapely. “Here I am,” I whispered. The head twisted round, and the face

was that of the young woman who had received the messenger at the postern the day before. But it was clear that she had not been sobbing, though her face wore a look of concern.

“I must speak with Madame the Countess,” said I, and added what I thought would most expedite matters: “I bring news of Monsieur de Merri.”

The head disappeared: there was more whispering: then the maid looked out again, using similar precautions to mine with regard to the casement.

“Who are you, Monsieur?” she asked.

“I will explain all later. There is little time now. I may soon be looked for. Contrive to let me have an interview with Madame the Countess. I don’t know how to get to her: I’m not acquainted with the chateau.”

“Put your head a little further out, Monsieur, — so that I can see your face.”

I obeyed. She gazed at me searchingly, then withdrew her head again. Reappearing very soon, she said: “Madame has decided to trust you. These are her apartments. There is a door from a gallery where pictures hang — ”

“I have been to that gallery,” I interrupted, “but I was watched while there. Is there no other way?”

She thought a moment. “Yes, the garden. At

the foot of the terrace, turn to the right, till you get to the end of this wing."

"But the man at the steps yonder will stop me. He has done so already."

"That beast! Alas, yes! Well, I will go and talk with him, and keep him looking at me. You go down to the terrace without attracting any attention, walk close to the house till you get to this end of the balustrade, step over the balustrade, descend the bank as quietly as possible, and wait behind the shrubbery near the door at the end of this wing, — it's the door from Madame's apartments to the garden. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Then I will be talking to that man by the time you can get to the terrace. I go at once. Be quick, Monsieur, — and careful."

Admiring the swift wits and decision of the girl, I hastened through the corridor, down the stairs, and into the hall. The Count and the long-nosed man were so buried in their game that neither looked up. A pair of varlets in attendance were yawning on a bench. Yawning in imitation, I passed with feigned listlessness to the terrace, went noiselessly along by the house-wall, and followed the wing to the end of the balustrade. I did not venture even to look toward the steps, but I could hear the



maid talking and laughing coquettishly. I crossed the balustrade by sitting on it and swinging my legs over; then strode on light feet down the grassy bank and through an opening in the shrubbery I saw at my right. I found myself in a walk which, bordered all the way by shrubbery, ran from a narrow door in the end of the wing to the other extremity of the garden. The door, when I first glanced at it, was slightly ajar: I supposed the maid had left it so. But as soon as I had come to a halt in the walk, the door opened, and a very young, very slender, very sad-faced, very beautiful lady came out, with eyes turned upon me in a mixture of hope and fear.

I instinctively fell upon my knee before that picture of grief and beauty. She wore, I remember, a gown of faded blue, and blue was the colour of her eyes — a soft, fair blue, like that of the sky. She was so slim, sorrowful, small, childlike, forlorn, — I would have died to serve her.

She looked at me searchingly, as the maid had done, but with more courtesy, and then, in a low voice bidding me follow her, led the way down the walk and into a side path that wound among some tall rose-bushes. Here we could not be seen from the walk and yet we might hear anybody approaching. She stopped and faced me.

"You have news of Monsieur de Merri," she said eagerly. "What of him?"

"He is prevented from coming to you, Madame."

Her face, pale before, turned white as a sheet.

"But," I hastened to add, "I have come in his stead, and I will serve you as willingly as he."

"But that will not do," she said, in great agitation. "Nobody can serve me at this pass *but* Monsieur de Merri. Where is he? What prevents him?"

"I left him at La Flèche," said I lamely. "I assure you it is utterly impossible for him to come. But believe me, I am wholly yours for whatever service you desired of him. You can see that I have come from him." I took from my pocket her note, and held it out. I then told her my name and parentage, and begged her not to distrust me because I was of another religion than hers.

"It isn't that I don't believe you, Monsieur," she replied. "It isn't that I doubt your willingness to help me."

"As to my ability, try me, Madame. My zeal will inspire me."

"I don't doubt your ability to do brave and difficult things, Monsieur. But it is not that. It happens — the circumstances are such — alas, nobody but

Monsieur de Merri himself can help me! If you but knew! If *he* but knew!”

“Tell me the case, Madame. Trust me, I beg. Let me be the judge as to whether I can help you.”

“I do trust you. I am not afraid to tell you. You will see plainly enough. It is this: I have been slandered to my husband. A week has been given me in which to clear myself. The week ends to-morrow. If I have not proved my innocence by that time, God knows what fate my husband will inflict upon me!”

She shuddered and closed her eyes.

“But your innocence, Madame — who can doubt it?”

“My husband is a strange man, Monsieur. He has little faith in women.”

“But what slander can he believe of you? And who could utter it? What is its nature?”

“I suppose it is my husband’s friend, Captain Ferragant, who uttered it. The nature of it is, that Monsieur de Merri’s name is associated with mine. Monsieur de Merri is said to have made a boast about me, in the tavern at Montoire. It is a hideous lie, invented when Monsieur de Merri had gone away. And now you see how only Monsieur de Merri can save me, by coming and facing our accusers and swearing to my innocence. But to-morrow

is the last day. Oh, if he had known why I wanted him! It is too late now — or is it? Perhaps he sent you ahead? Perhaps he is coming after you? Is it not so? He will be here to-morrow, will he not?"

Bitterly I shook my head.

"Then I am lost," she said, in a whisper of despair.

"But that cannot be. It isn't for you to prove your innocence — it is for your accuser to prove your guilt. He cannot do that."

"You do not know the Count de Lavardin. He will believe any ill of a woman, and anything that Captain Ferragant tells him. The fact that Monsieur de Merri is young and accomplished is enough. My husband has suspected me from the hour of our marriage. And besides that, people at Montoire have testified that they heard Monsieur de Merri boast of conquests. Whether that be true or not, it could not have been of me that he boasted. And if he but knew how I stand, how readily he would fly to clear me! He is no coward, I am sure."

I had evidence of that; evidence also of Monsieur de Merri's unfortunate habit of boasting of conquests. But I was convinced that it could not have been of her that he had boasted. These thoughts, however, were but transient flashings

across my sense of the plight in which I had put this unhappy woman by killing Monsieur de Merri. I tried to minimize that plight.

“But your fears are exaggerated. Your husband will not dare go too far.”

“He will dare take my life — or lock me up for the rest of my days in a dungeon — or I know not what. He is all-powerful on his estate — lord of life and death. You know what these great noblemen do when they believe their wives unfaithful. I have heard how the Prince de Condé — ”

“Yes; but the Count de Lavardin would have your relations to fear.”

“I have no relations. I was an orphan in a convent. The Count took a fancy to my face, they told me. They urged me to consent to the marriage. I could not displease them — I had never disobeyed them. And now this is the end. Well, I am in the hands of God.” She glanced upwards and gave a sigh of bitter resignation.

“But after all,” I interposed, “you are not certain how your husband will act.”

“He has threatened the worst vengeance if I cannot clear myself to-morrow. If you knew him, Monsieur!”

“He allowed you a week, you say, — ”

“From the day he accused me — last Saturday.”

“And what facilities did he give you for the purpose?”

“His men and horses were at my service. He knew, of course, that all I could do was to send for Monsieur de Merri.”

“But why did he not send for Monsieur de Merri?”

“I don’t know. I suppose he was ruled by the advice of Captain Ferragant. Perhaps he thought Monsieur de Merri would not come at his request.”

“But you did not use your husband’s men and horses to send for Monsieur de Merri.”

“No. Mathilde — my maid whom you saw just now — thought I would better act secretly. She feared the Captain would bribe the messenger to make only a pretence of taking my message to Monsieur de Merri. In that case Monsieur de Merri, knowing nothing, would not come, and his not coming would be taken as evidence of guilt — as it will be now, though he got my message, for Hugues is faithful. Why is it, Monsieur, that Monsieur de Merri sent back word by Hugues that he would follow close, if he could not come?”

“Something happened afterward. Hugues, then, is the name of the messenger you sent?”

“Yes. He is devoted to Mathilde. They are accustomed to meet at certain times. Mathilde has

not much freedom, as you may guess, sharing my life as she does. So she contrived to get possession for awhile of the key to a postern yonder, and to pass it to Hugues when he came with flour. He had a duplicate made, so that she could restore the original and yet retain a key with which to let herself out and meet him in the forest. Thus she was able to see him last Sunday morning, and to send him after Monsieur de Merri. We knew that De Merri had started Westward, and Hugues traced him from town to town. Ah, when Hugues returned successful, how rejoiced we were! We expected Monsieur de Merri every hour. But the time went by, and our hopes changed to fears, and now, heaven pity me, it is the fears that have come true!"

"But you are not yet lost. Even if the Count should be so blind as to think you guilty, you have at least one resource. You have the key to the postern. You can flee."

"And he caught before I had fled two leagues. I am visited every three hours, as if I were a prisoner, and as soon as I was missed a score of men would be sent in all directions. Besides, for some reason or other, the Count has the roads watched from the tower. If I fled into the forest, the bloodhounds would be put on my track. My husband has hinted

all this to me. And where could I flee to but the Convent? The Count would have men there before I could reach it."

"I could find some other place to take you to," said I at a hazard.

"Ah, Monsieur, then indeed would appearances be against me. Then indeed would the enemy of my poor reputation have his triumph. Alas, there is no honourable place in this world for a wife who leaves her husband's roof, though it be her prison. I will be true to my vows, though I die. If there be wrong, it shall be all of his doing, none of mine."

"You believe it is this Captain who has slandered you. Why should he do that? Why is he your enemy?"

She blushed and looked down. I understood.

"But why do you not tell your husband that?" I asked quickly.

"The Count says it is an old story that wives accuse their husbands' friends whom they dislike. He thinks women are made of lies. And in any case he says if I am innocent of this charge I can prove my innocence. So all depended on Monsieur de Merri's being here to-morrow to speak for me."

"Ah, Madame, if only my speaking for you would avail anything!"

"From the depths of my heart I thank you,



Monsieur, though you see how useless you — And yet there is one thing you can say for me!” A great light of sudden hope dawned upon her face. “You can tell how you saw Monsieur de Merri — that he was coming here, but was prevented — ”

“Yes, I can do that.”

“And perhaps — who knows? — you can induce the Count to give me a few more days, till the cause of Monsieur de Merri’s delay is past. And then you can ride or send to Monsieur de Merri, and tell him my situation, and he will come and put my accuser to shame, after all! Yes, thank God, there is hope! Oh, Monsieur, you may yet be able to save me!”

There were tears of joy on her face, and she gratefully clasped my hand in both of hers.

It sickened my heart to do it, but I could only shake my head sadly and say:

“No, Madame, Monsieur de Merri can never come to speak for you.”

“Why not?” she cried, all the hope rushing out of her face again.

“He is dead — slain in a duel,” I said in a voice as faint as a whisper.

Her face seemed to turn to marble.

“Who killed him?” she presently asked in a horrified tone.

I knelt at her feet, with averted eyes, as one who is all contrition but dare not ask a pardon.

“You!” she whispered.

“When I found this message upon him afterward,” said I, “I saw what injury was done. I could only come in his place, and offer myself. By one means and another, I learned who it was had sent for him.”

“That brave young gentleman,” said she, following her own thoughts; “that he should die so soon! And you, with his blood on your hands,” — she drew back from me a step — “come to offer your service to me who, little as I was to him, must yet be counted among his friends! Monsieur, what could you think of my loyalty?”

“I thought only of what might be done to prevent further harm. Though I fought him, I was not his enemy. I had never seen him before. It was a sudden quarrel, about nothing. Heaven knows, I did not think it would end as it did. That end has been lamentable enough, Madame. Punish me if you will: as his friend, you are entitled to avenge him.”

“I only pity him, Monsieur. God forbid I should think of revenge!”

“You are a saint, Madame. I was about to say that my having killed him need not make you re-



"WE WERE INTERRUPTED BY A LOW CRY."



ject my service. Your doing so might but add to the evil consequences of my act. Surely he would prefer your accepting my aid, now that he is for ever powerless to give his. And we must think now of something to be done — ”

We were interrupted by a low cry, “Madame, Madame!” in a soft voice from within the arbour that sheltered the walk. The Countess said to me, “It is Mathilde. She means some one is coming. Hide among these bushes. If we do not meet again, adieu, Monsieur; I thank you from my heart, and may God pardon you the death of Monsieur de Merri!”

She started for the walk: I whispered, “But I must help you! Can we not meet again presently?”

“I know not,” she replied. “Act as you think best, Monsieur. But do not endanger yourself. I must be gone now.”

She hastened to join the maid, whose whereabouts were indicated by a low cough. I heard voices, and instantly crawled under the rose bushes, heedless of scratches. As the voices came down the walk, one of them turned out to be that of Captain Ferragant. There was but one other, which I took, from the talk which I heard later, to belong to a falconer or some such underling. The Captain addressed a few remarks to the Countess, as to her

state of health and the beauty of the day, which she answered in low tones. Then he and his companion proceeded to walk about, talking continually, never getting entirely out of my hearing, and often coming so near that I could make out their words. It seemed that an endless length of time passed in this way. I heard no more of Madame and the maid. Finally the Captain and his man walked back toward the house. I rose, stretched my legs, and peered up and down the walk. It was deserted. What was I to do next? I naturally strolled toward the chateau. As I neared the door leading to Madame's apartments, out came Mathilde.

"I have been watching for you, Monsieur. Madame had to come in, to avoid suspicion. If you can get back to the terrace by the way you came down, I will go again and distract the attention of the guard."

"I can do that. But what of Madame? I must see her again. We must find some way to save her."

"Do what you can, Monsieur. If you think of anything, you know how to communicate with us by way of the windows. But lose no time now."

She hastened away to beguile the man on watch at the steps. When I heard her laughter, I sped over the grass to the foot of the bank. I clambered

up, crossed the balustrade, went along the house, and entered the hall. Monsieur de Pepicot was just in the act of saying "Checkmate."

The Count's face turned a shade more ashen, and he looked unhappy. Presently he smiled, however, and said peevishly:

"Well, you must give me an opportunity of revenge. We must play another game."

"I shall be much honoured," said Monsieur de Pepicot. "But is there time to-day?"

"No; it will soon be supper time. But there will be time to-morrow. You shall stay here to-night."

"With great pleasure; but there are some poor things of mine at the cabaret yonder I should like to have by me."

"I will send a man for your baggage," said the Count.

"Then I shall have nothing to mar my happiness," said Monsieur de Pepicot composedly.

I was very anxious to remain at the chateau for the present, and feared rather dismissal than the enforced continuance there which the long-nosed man had fancied might be our fate. So, to make sure, I said:

"If Monsieur the Count will do me the honour

of a game to-morrow, I will try to make a better contest than I did against Monsieur de Pepicot."

The Count looked not displeased at this; it gave him somebody to beat in the event of his being again defeated by Monsieur de Pepicot.

"Certainly," said he; "I cannot refuse you. You too will remain my guest; and if I may send for your baggage also —"

I felt vaguely that it would be better to leave my horse and belongings at the inn at Montoire, in case I should ever wish to make a stealthy departure from the chateau: so I replied:

"I thank you, Monsieur; but there is nothing I have urgent need for, or of such great value that I would keep it near."

"As you please," said the Count, observing me keenly with his half-ambushed eyes.

The man who had escorted us to the chateau was sent to fetch Monsieur de Pepicot's baggage; and would have brought his horse also, but that Monsieur de Pepicot mildly but firmly insisted otherwise and despatched orders for its care in his absence. The baggage consisted of a somewhat sorry looking portmanteau, which was taken to our chamber. We then had supper, during which the Count and my long-nosed friend talked of chess play, while Captain Ferragant ate in frowning



silence, now and then casting no very tolerant glances at us two visitors. I would have tried by conversation to gain some closer knowledge of this man, but I saw there was no getting him to talk while that mood lasted. After supper the Count and the Captain sat over their wine in a manner which showed a long drinking bout to be their regular evening custom. Monsieur de Pepicot and I accompanied them as far as our position as guests required. We then plead the fatigue of recent travel, and were shown to our room, in which an additional bed had been placed. The Count was by this time sufficiently forward in his devotions to Bacchus to dispense easily with such dull company as ours, and the Captain, by the free breath he drew as we rose to go, showed his relief at our departure.

When the servant had placed our candles and left us alone, I expressed a wonder why so great a house could not afford us a room apiece.

"It is very simple," said the long-nosed man, opening his portmanteau. "If they should take a fancy to make caged birds of us, it's easier tending one cage than two."

I went to bed wondering what the morrow had in store. I saw now clearly that I might accomplish something by informing the Count that Monsieur

de Merri was dead and that he was on his way to Lavardin when I met him. His failure to appear could not then be held as evidence of guilt: his intention to come might count much in the Countess's favour.

As my head sank into the pillow, there came suddenly to my mind the second of the three maxims Blaise Tripault had learned from the monk:

*"Never sleep in a house where the master is old and the wife young."*

## CHAPTER VII.

### STRANGE DISAPPEARANCES

MONSIEUR DE PEPICOT spent so many minutes among the contents of his travelling bag, that he was not in bed as soon as I. But he was by far the sooner asleep, as his loud snoring testified. To that music ran my thoughts of the beautiful young Countess and her unhappy situation, till at last they passed into dreams. In the midst of the night I woke, and listened for my neighbour's snoring. But it had ceased. Then I strained my ears to catch the sound of his breathing, but none came. Wondering at this, I rose and went over toward his bed. There was just light enough by the window to see that it was empty.

I was still in the midst of my surprise, when the door opened with a very slight creak, and in walked a slim figure so silently that I knew it was without shoes.

"Is that you, Monsieur de Pepicot?" I asked.

"H'sh," he replied in a whisper, closing the door

carefully. "Don't disturb the slumbers of the household. You are very wakeful."

"No more so than you are, it seems," I said.

"That is true. I often suffer from sleeplessness, and I find a walk is the thing to put me right."

"You were wise to take a light with you on your walk," I observed, for he now produced a small lantern from under his loose-fitting doublet, where it had been entirely concealed.

"Yes; one might hurt one's toes in these dark passages," he answered, and placidly drew some papers from his breast pocket, folded them carefully by the lantern's light, and then as carefully replaced them. "I trust you made some progress in your affair here during the afternoon."

"Yes. But you were kept busy with the Count."

"Oh, I don't complain. I was about to say that if you preferred to leave the house to-night, no doubt I could manage it for you."

"Why should I prefer to leave to-night?"

"Oh, merely because this Count may be a dangerous man to have much to do with. I know nothing of your affairs, and of course you have no interest in mine. The Count will understand that, no doubt, and will not hold you responsible for anything I may do, if you choose to stay here longer."

“Well, I must stay here longer, in any case.”

“Then there is no more to be said,” answered the long-nosed man, extinguishing his lantern, which he wrapped up and put into his portmanteau. He then lay down upon his bed, without undressing.

I returned to my own couch and was soon asleep.

When I woke again, it was daylight. Monsieur de Pepicot and his portmanteau were gone. It occurred to me now, as I washed and dressed, that when he spoke of my departing by night he intended to make just such an unceremonious exit himself. In that case, I inferred, he had thought it only fair, as I had helped him to get into the chateau, that he should offer to help me to get out, for he had made no secret of his fears that we might find opposition to our doing so. But, if he had indeed fled, how had he contrived to get out in the middle of the night? As for his purpose in getting in, he must have accomplished that while on his midnight perambulations.

I went downstairs, but he was not in the hall, nor on the terrace nor in the courtyard. It was a fine morning, and I was for walking about. At one side of the courtyard the wall was pierced by a narrow gateway, which took me into a second courtyard, of which one of the further angles was filled by a quadrant of the great tower that rose

toward heaven from a corner of the main chateau. There was a small door from this courtyard to the tower. This tower, for its bigness and height, took my eyes the first moment, but the next they were attracted by the living figures in the courtyard. These were Captain Ferragant and a pack of great hounds which he was marshalling before him, throwing a piece of meat now to one, now to another, calling out by name which animal was to catch. He indeed managed to keep them in some sort of order and from closing around him, and though they all barked and leaped at each throw, yet only the one whose name was called would dare actually to close jaws upon the titbit. This went on for some time, until at last one huge brute, leaping higher, seized the meat intended for another.

The red Captain swore a fierce oath, and, grasping a whip, called the interloping dog to come to him. The animal slunk back. The Captain advanced among the pack, still calling the hound in the most threatening voice. But the hound slunk further, growling and showing his teeth. The Captain sprang forward and brought down his whip. The dog, mutinous, made a snap at the Captain. The latter, now deeply enraged, threw aside the whip, caught the animal by the neck, lifted it high, and, with a swift contraction of his fingers,

caused its eyes and tongue to protrude and its body to writhe and hang powerless. He then flung the dead creature to a corner of the yard, and looked at me with a smile half vaunting, half amused, as if to say, "That is how I can treat those who thwart my will," and to ridicule my wonder at his fury and strength.

I turned with a look of pity toward the victim of his anger. At that moment the Count de Lavardin entered the courtyard, and his glance followed mine. Having seen what I saw, he looked protestingly at the Captain.

"The brute was rebellious," said Ferragant.

"But one doesn't run across such dogs every day," complained the Count.

"The rarest dog shall not defy me," was the cool answer.

"That's all very well, if it had been your own dog," said the Count, still peevish.

"Oh, as to that, we are quits now. Your dog to-day pays for my man you killed last week."

"Pish, it's easy enough to find rascals like that by the score. Not so, dogs like this. Well, talking won't make him live again — Good morning, *Monsieur*. Where is your comrade, *Monsieur de Pepicot*?"

I could only answer that on waking I had been

disappointed of seeing either Monsieur de Pepicot or his baggage. "Nor have I beheld him since, though I have been looking about."

"That is very strange, — that he should take his baggage from the room," said the Count, exchanging a look of surprise with the Captain. He then called two servants and gave them orders quietly, which must have been to search the house and grounds for Monsieur de Pepicot. As we returned to the hall, the Count questioned me, watching me sharply the while. I was perfectly safe in telling the literal truth, though not all of it: how Monsieur de Pepicot was a stranger to me, how I had never spoken to him before yesterday, how I knew nothing of his business, and so forth. Of course I said nothing of his midnight walk or of having conversed with him at all after going to bed. The Count's mystification and annoyance were manifest, the more so when, after some time, the servants returned to say that the missing man could not be found. When he had heard their report, the Count was very angry.

"Name of the devil, then, how did he get out? There is treachery somewhere, and somebody shall pay for it," he screeched, and then despatched a man to the cabaret to see if Monsieur de Pepicot had taken his horse away. The man came back saying



the horse was gone, but nobody had seen the owner take it.

"It is certainly odd that the gentleman should depart secretly like that, when he might have waited for day and gone civilly," said I, to evince my simplicity.

"You are right, very right," said the Count. "Well, at least you remain to play a game of chess with me. What I am thinking is, the man must have had some private reason for obtaining entrance to my house."

"Possibly, Monsieur," I replied, bearing the searching gaze of both the Count and the Captain well enough.

"In that case, he made a tool of you," added the Count, still intent on my expression.

"That would be the inference," said I.

"Well, we must satisfy ourselves as to how he took his departure, if we cannot guess why. Make yourself master of the house, Monsieur. We shall have our game nevertheless."

And he went off with the Captain, to examine the places of exit from the chateau and the men who were responsible for their security. One could see that Monsieur de Pepicot's disappearance was as disturbing to the Count as it was puzzling to me.

I wandered out to the terrace and paced the walk

along the house. My eyes turned toward that window in the west wing which I knew to belong to the apartments of the Countess. I turned along the wing, and strolled under that window, thinking Madame or Mathilde might make an appearance at it. I kept moving to and fro within easy ear-shot of it, sometimes glancing up at the half-open casement. This was the day on which the poor lady's fate was to be determined by her husband and lord. I wondered what sort of scene was arranged for the event, whether it would have the form of trial and judgment, when and where it would occur, and if I should be admitted to it. Probably I should not, and therefore I would best speak to the Count regarding Monsieur de Merri before. The thing was, to find a pretext for broaching the matter without betraying that I had talked with the Countess. I had thought all this over during the night, a hundred times, but now I thought it over again; and, in vague search for some hint or guidance, I looked often up to the window, as I have said.

Presently I heard a single sharp, low syllable of laughter, which drew my glance to the door by which I had come out to the terrace. There stood the red Captain, his eyes upon me. When he saw that I noticed him, he came toward me, whereupon I, with pretended carelessness, went to meet him half way.

"You seem to find it very interesting, that window," said he, in a low voice. "To me it looks like any of the others." And he ran his glance ironically along the whole range.

"I thought you had gone with the Count to learn how Monsieur de Pepicot got away," said I, guessing that he had come back to watch me, doubtless considering that, after the evident duplicity of one guest, the other might require some looking after.

"And so you thought yourself free to post yourself over there and make eyes at that window?" said the Captain with a smile that half jeered at me, half threatened me with annihilation.

"I do not quite understand your little jest," said I, boldly enough.

"You may find it one of those jests in which the laugh is only on one side, and that side not yours, young gentleman. Your friend with the long nose, it appears, had his secret motives for paying a visit to this chateau. We smelt some such thing when the letter came asking for a set of chessmen, and so the Count admitted you, thinking you just as safe inside the chateau as outside. It was not the intention to let you out again in too great haste."

"In that case," I put in, feigning to treat the matter gaily, "Monsieur de Pepicot was wise in leaving as he did."

“I was about to say that if Monsieur de Pepicot had his secret purposes, it is but fair to suppose you may have yours. If it turns out to be so, and if your object has anything to do with what you may imagine is behind that window, — why, then, I warn you in time it would be much better for you to have been that dog which opposed me a while ago, — very much better, my pert young gentleman, I assure you.”

He turned and walked into the house, leaving me without any fit answer on my tongue, or indeed in my mind either.

It appeared to me that the sooner I had my explanation with the Count, the better for both the Countess and myself. So I returned into the hall, which the Captain was leaving by the court-yard door, and waited for the Count's reappearance. When he did come, it was clear from his face that the manner of Monsieur de Pepicot's escape — for escape it must now be called — was still a mystery. It was plain, too, when his eyes alighted on me, that he had heard from the Captain, who followed him, of my conduct beneath the window. As he came toward me, he scowled and looked very wicked and crafty. Before he could speak, I said:

“Monsieur, there is something I wish to tell you, if you will allow me to speak to you alone.”

“Regarding Monsieur de Pepicot?”

“No; regarding myself and the reason of my coming to Lavardin.”

“That is interesting. Let us hear.”

“It is for you alone.”

“Oh, to be sure. Captain Ferragant, if you will excuse me, —”

The Captain, with a shrug, swaggered off to the furthest corner of the hall.

“You have been acquainted,” I began, “with a certain Monsieur de Merri.”

The Count’s face seemed to jump. I had certainly caught his attention. But his speech was perfectly controlled as he said:

“Yes. And what of him?”

“He had the misfortune to be killed in a sudden duel four days ago at La Flèche.”

He was plainly startled; but, after a moment’s silence, he only said, “You astonish me,” and waited for me to continue.

“I feared I should,” said I, “for it turned out, after the duel, that Monsieur de Merri was on his way to see you, upon some matter of great urgency.”

“On his way to see me! How do you know that?”

I thought it best to tell as much truth as possible.

“I learned from his servant that he was bound

in great haste for Montoire. Coming to Montoire, I inquired, and was informed that his only tie in this neighbourhood was his acquaintance with you. Therefore it must have been you he was coming to see, and his haste implied the urgency of his reasons, whatever they may have been. Thinking you might be depending upon his arrival, I resolved to tell you of his death."

"It is a little odd that you should put yourself out to do that."

"It might be, if I were not responsible for his failure to come to you."

"Oh, then it was you who killed him?"

"Yes; and thought it only the proper act of a gentleman to carry the news to the person who may have expected him."

"H'm. No doubt. But why did you not come directly and tell me?"

"I heard you made yourself entirely inaccessible to strangers. So when Monsieur de Pepicot spoke of asking you to lend us chessmen, I thought it might lead to some breaking down of your reserve, — as it did."

"But why did you wait a day before telling me?"

"I hoped that chance might enable me to see you alone. But you were so deeply engrossed in your chess. And I hesitated lest you might think

yourself bound, as Monsieur de Merri's friend, to deliver me up for having violated the edict."

These were certainly sufficient reasons, though, as you know, I had not thought of telling him of Monsieur de Merri till after I had heard the Countess's story, and therefore they were not the true answer to his question. But I no longer found safe standing on the ground of truth, and so fell back upon the soil of invention, uncertain as it was. The Count looked as far into me as he could, and then called the Captain, who came without haste to the great fireplace where we were. Without any explanation to me, or other preface, the Count repeated my disclosure to his friend, all the time in the manner of one submitting a story to the hearer's judgment as to its truth.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders, and looked at me scornfully. "It is a fine, credible tale indeed," said he.

"If you will take the trouble to send to La Flèche, you will find that Monsieur de Merri is really slain," said I warmly.

"Oh, no doubt," said the Captain. "But before he was slain, he had time to take you into his confidence regarding certain things."

"Not at all. I had never seen him before that evening. It was from his servant, after he was dead,

that I learned he was coming to Montoire. If you can find that servant, at La Flèche or Sablé, he will tell you so."

"How could he have known he was wanted here?" asked the Captain of the Count. "Your offer of a messenger was disdained."

"I knew she would contrive to send after him on her own account, if I gave her enough liberty," returned the Count.

"It argues skill in such contrivances," said the Captain, with a significant look.

The Count frowned in a sickly way, but not at the speaker. "Well, in any case, the liberty will now be cut off," he said harshly. But after a moment, he added: "And yet, if this gentleman does not lie, Monsieur de Merri was coming here fast enough."

"To brazen it out, perhaps. There is no limit to the self-confidence of youth. As for this gentleman, how does his story account for the interest he takes in a certain window that looks upon the terrace?"

The Count's face darkened again, as he turned menacingly toward me. "Yes, by heaven, I had forgotten that."

"To be frank," said I awkwardly, after a moment's hesitation, "I had seen a pretty face



there — I mean that of Mathilde.” I added the last words in haste, for the Count’s look had shown for an instant that he took me to mean that of the Countess.

“Ah! that of Mathilde,” he repeated, subsiding.

“And how did you know her name was Mathilde?” asked the Captain, in a cold, derisive tone. The Count’s eyes waited for my answer.

“I — exchanged a few words with her yesterday afternoon,” I replied.

“In regard to what subject?” asked the Count quickly, making a veritable grimace in the acuteness of his suspicion.

“I paid her a compliment or two, such as one bestows upon a pretty girl.”

“He is evading,” said the Captain. “It is a question whether he did not presume to offer his compliments higher. One does not say to a pretty girl, ‘What is your name?’ nor does the girl reply ‘Mathilde,’ as if she were a child. It is more likely he heard the girl’s name from other lips. And was he not found spying about the west gallery by Ambroise? My dear Count, I fear you kept your nose too close to the chess-board yesterday afternoon. As for me, if I had known as much as I know now, I should have been more watchful.”

The Count’s face had turned sicklier and uglier

as his friend had continued to speak. He looked now as if he would like to pounce upon me with his claw-like fingers. He was evidently between the desire to question me outright as to whether anything had passed between me and the Countess, and the dislike of showing openly to a stranger any suspicion of his wife. The latter feeling prevailed, and he regained control of himself. I breathed a little easier. But just then it occurred to me that the Count would surely tax the Countess with having seen me; that she would acknowledge our meeting; and that her own account of it would be disbelieved, and the worst imaginings added, for the very reason of my maintaining secrecy about it. I therefore took a sudden course.

“Monsieur,” I said, “I will be perfectly open with you. From some casual words of Monsieur de Merri at the inn at La Flèche, before we quarrelled, I was led to believe that the cause of his journey had something to do with the welfare of a lady. Afterwards when I heard whither he was bound so hastily, I remembered that. On learning at Montoire that this chateau was the only house in which he was known hereabouts, I assumed that the lady must be in this chateau. It turned out that the only lady here was the Countess herself. Do you wonder, then, at my endeavouring to speak

to the Countess first upon the matter of Monsieur de Merri's death?"

"Pray go on," said the Count, who was taking short and rapid breaths.

"It is true I saw the maid at that window, but I saw also the impossibility of communicating properly with Madame by that channel. So, in spite of your sentinel's vigilance, I crossed the balustrade to the garden, and there had the honour of presenting myself to the Countess. I acquainted her with the fate of Monsieur de Merri. Her demeanour causing me to believe that this put her into peril on her own account, I so pushed my inquiries and offers of service that she told me what that peril was. She said she was the victim of a slander which only Monsieur de Merri's presence here could clear her of. We were soon interrupted and she left me. I did not see her again, but it appeared to me that, as Monsieur de Merri's presence here would have stood in her favour, the news of his intention to be here must also stand that way. And now, Monsieur, you have the whole story."

It seemed to have weight with him: but, alas, he looked to the Captain for an opinion. That gentleman, regarding me with a smile of ironical admiration, uttered a monosyllabic laugh in his throat, and said:

“There is one thing we can believe, at least. We know Monsieur de Merri’s habit of disclosing his affairs with ladies to strangers at inns.”

The Count’s face grew dark again.

“But we can never be sure how much may have passed between Monsieur de Merri and this gentleman on the subject before they quarrelled, or what was the real motive that brought him here.”

“My God!” I cried; “what gentleman could require a stronger motive than I have shown? Having prevented Monsieur de Merri from coming here upon so urgent a matter, what else could I do in honour but come in his place?”

“‘In his place’ — yes, perhaps, that is well said,” retorted the Captain, with his evil smile.

The Count, whose judgment seemed entirely under the dominion of his friend, looked at me again as if he would destroy me. After a moment, he took a turn across the hall and back, and then said to me:

“Well, in the midst of all this deceit and uncertainty one thing is clear. You know too much of our private affairs here to be permitted to go where you will, for the present. I must ask you, therefore, to keep to your chamber awhile. Your wants will be provided for there. I will show you the way myself, on this occasion.” He motioned

toward the stairway, and the Captain stood ready to accompany him.

"That amounts to making me a prisoner, Monsieur," said I.

"We shall not dispute over words," replied the Count. "By your own confession, you are liable to the law for killing Monsieur de Merri."

"I have reason to expect the King's pardon for that. Measures have already been taken."

"Pray don't keep me waiting, Monsieur. I should not like to be compelled to have my men lay hands on you." At the same time his smile looked as if he would like that very much.

There was nothing to do, for the moment, but yield. The Captain was watching to see where my hand moved, and I know not how many armed men were in the court-yard, besides the servants waiting at the other end of the hall. So I obeyed the Count's gesture, merely saying:

"You will find I am not a person who will go unavenged in case of indignity."

The Count laughed, in his dry, sharp manner, and walked by my side. The Captain followed. As soon as I was in my room, the Count called a servant, who went away and presently returned with a key. The Count and his friend then left me, and locked the door on the outside. As I sat down on my bed, I

was glad I had offered no useless resistance, for, as it was, I had not been deprived of my weapons.

To make a short matter here of what seemed a very long one at the time, I was kept locked in my room all that day, with two armed men outside my door, as I guessed first from hearing them, and certified afterwards by seeing them when a servant brought my food. What made the confinement and inaction the more trying was my knowledge that this was the day on which the Countess was to plead her innocence. I kept wondering through the tedious hours how matters were going with her, and I often strained my ears in the poor hope of discovering by them what might be going on in the chateau. But I never heard anything but the rough speech and movements of the men outside my door, and now and then the voice of some attendant on the terrace below my window. I could look diagonally across the terrace to the window where I had seen Mathilde, but not once during all that day did I behold a sign of life there. The night came without bringing me any hint as to how the Countess had fared. I could not sleep till late.

When I woke, early in the morning, I noticed that my door was slightly ajar. Looking out, I found the corridor empty. I took this to mean that I was not to remain a prisoner, and so it proved. Hastily

dressing and going downstairs, though many servants were about, I encountered no hindrance. I passed out to the terrace. To my surprise, nobody was on guard at the steps; so I went boldly down to the garden. My heart beat with a vague hope of meeting the Countess, though it was scarce late enough in the day to expect her to be out. I must confess it was not alone her being an oppressed lady whom I had engaged myself to aid, that made me look so eagerly down all the walks and peer so keenly into all the arbours; I must confess it was largely the impression her beauty and tenderness had left upon me. But I was disappointed: I explored the whole garden in vain.

Anything to be near her, I thought. So I went and hung about the door between the garden and her apartments. But it remained closed and enigmatic. I had another idea, and, returning into the house, took my way unchecked to the gallery of pictures, wondering at the freedom of passage now allowed me, and at the same time resolved to make the most of it. I could scarce believe my eyes when I saw the door ajar which led to Madame's suite. I went and tapped lightly on it, but got no answer. It opened to a large drawing-room, well furnished but without any inhabitant. I crossed this room to the other side, which had two doors, both open.

One gave entrance to a sleeping-chamber, in a corner of which was a prie-dieu, and which showed in a hundred details to be the bedroom of a lady. But the bed was made up, and a smaller bed, in a recess, which might be that of the maid, also had the appearance of not having been used the previous night. I looked through the other doorway from the drawing-room, and saw a stairway leading down to the garden door. Had the Countess and Mathilde, then, gone into the garden at the time I was in the act of coming to the gallery? No; for the garden door was bolted on the inside. I went to one of the drawing-room windows looking on the terrace, and made sure it was the window from which Mathilde had first answered my call. And then it dawned upon me what the desertion of these rooms meant, and why I was allowed to go where I would in the house and garden. The Countess and her maid were no longer there. What had become of them?



## CHAPTER VIII.

### MATHILDE

WELL, there was no indication to be found in the Countess's apartments as to where she had removed to, and I thought it best not to risk being seen there. So I went down to the hall again. As I glanced through the court-yard to the outer gates, I thought of trying to leave the chateau, to see if my new liberty went so far as to permit that. But I reflected that if I were once let out I might not be let in again, and my chance of learning what had become of the Countess lay, I supposed, inside the chateau. So I resolved to stay there and await the turn that matters might take. And certainly never was any man a guest in stranger circumstances of guestship. I hated and feared my host, and was loth to accept his hospitality, yet stayed of my own will, though I knew not certainly whether I was free to go. My host hated me, yet tolerated my presence — if indeed he would not have enforced it — for the sake

of having me at hand if he thought fit to crush me. When he appeared that morning, I thanked him ironically for restoring me to liberty. He only uttered his harsh crackling laugh in reply, and regarded me with a pretended disdain which failed to conceal his hatred and his longing to penetrate my mind and learn what indeed was between me and his Countess. In such men, especially when they have an evil suggester like the Captain at their ear, jealousy is a madness, and no assurances — nay, not even oaths — of innocence will be taken by them as truth. But his pride made him feign contempt for me, and he had nothing to say to me that day. Neither had the Captain, whose manner toward me merely reverted to what it had been at first. I saw my former place made ready at the table, and took it. The Count and his friend talked of their sports and the affairs of the estate, and not one word of the Countess was spoken. Having eaten, they went off to ride, leaving me to amuse myself as I might. The air of the chateau seemed the freer for their absence, but still it was to me a sinister place, and an irreligious place too, for, though the Count and his friend were Catholics, I had not seen the sign of a chaplain or of any religious observance since I had crossed the drawbridge. So I prepared myself for a dull yet anxious day, and lounged about the hall

and court-yard as the places where I might best hope to find out something from the domestics of the house.

As I paced the stones of the court-yard, I became aware that a certain maidservant had been obtruding upon my view with a persistency that might be intentional. I now regarded her, as she stood in a small doorway leading to the kitchen. She was a plump, well-made thing, with a wholesome, honest face, but the sluttishness of her loose frock, and of a great cap that hung over her eyes, were too suggestive of the scullery. As soon as she saw I noticed her, she put one finger on her lip, and swiftly beckoned me with another.

I strolled carelessly over, and stopped within a foot of her, pretending to readjust my sword-belt.

“Monsieur,” she said in an undertone, “you are desired to be in your chamber this afternoon at four o’clock.”

I glanced at the girl in wonder.

“That is all at present,” she whispered. I had the discretion to move on. There were, as usual, several armed fellows idling about the court-yard, but none seemed to have observed that any word had passed between the kitchen-maid and me.

Here was matter for astonishment and conjecture for the next few hours. In some manner or other,

those hours passed, and at four I was seated in my chamber, having left the door open an inch or so. The turret clock had scarce done striking when the door was pushed wide; somebody entered and instantly closed it. I had a brief feeling of disappointment as I saw the slovenly frock and overhanging cap of the kitchen-maid. Was it she, then, who paid me the compliment of this clandestine visit?

No; for the cap was swiftly flung back from the brow, and there was the bright and comely face of Mathilde. I uttered her name in pleased surprise.

"Yes," she said quickly, "Mathilde in the guise of Brigitte. I have come from Madame the Countess."

"And where is she?" I asked eagerly.

"In the great tower."

"A prisoner?"

"Yes, and I with her. Fortunately there was nothing else to do with me, unless they killed me. So I am able to attend her."

"Faithful Mathilde! But why is this?"

"It is the fulfilment of the Count's threat in case Madame could not clear herself of that false charge."

"But the Count knew that Monsieur de Merri was coming here. I told him."

"Yes, Monsieur, but the Count would believe as much of your story as Captain Ferragant would

choose to let him. Your very interest in Madame's fate has been new food for his jealousy."

"God forbid!"

"It is not your fault, Monsieur; it is the Count's madness. He locks his wife up, as much that she may be inaccessible to you and all other men, as because of anything concerning Monsieur de Merri."

"You may well call it his madness."

"Yes; for, whatever other ladies may have deserved who have been treated thus, the Countess is the most virtuous of wives. Her regard for her marriage vows — in spite of the husband she has — is a part of her religion. But his mind is poisoned. He naturally believes that a young and beautiful woman would not be faithful to an old wolf like him. And he is almost right, for there is only one young and beautiful woman in France who would be, and that is the Countess."

"Surely not because she loves him?"

"Oh, no. It is because of her religion. She was brought up at a convent school, and when the Count offered to marry her, the Mother Superior made her think it her duty and heaven's will that she should accept the high position, where her piety would shine so much further; and having become his wife, she would die rather than violate a wife's duties by a hair's breadth. But what is her reward? Not be-

cause he loves her — there's more love in a stone! — but because he can't endure the thought of any trespass on what is his — because he dreads being made a jeer of — he goes mad with jealousy and suspicion. He imitates the Prince of Condé by locking his wife up in a tower."

"But this cannot last forever."

"No, Monsieur, and for a very good reason — the Countess's life cannot last forever under this treatment — even if the Count, in some wild imagining of her guilt, conjured up by Captain Ferragant, does not murder her. It's that thought which makes me shudder. It could be done so quietly in that lonely cell, and any account of her death could be given out to avoid scandal."

"Horrible, Mathilde! He would not go to that length."

"Men have done so. You are a stranger, and have not seen the frenzies into which the Count sometimes works himself, torturing his mind by imagining actions of infidelity on her part."

"But that disease of his mind will wear itself out; then he will see matters more sanely."

"Will he grow better, do you think, as he grows older, and drinks more wine, and falls more under the influence of the red Captain?"

To say truth, I thought as Mathilde did, though I had spoken otherwise for mere form of reassurance.

“What is her prison like?” I asked.

“A gloomy room no larger than this, with a single small window. There is no panelling nor tapestry nor plaster — nothing but the bare stones. There are a bed for Madame, a cot for me, a table, and two chairs: nothing else to make it look like a human habitation, save our crucifixes, an image of the Virgin, a trunk, and Madame’s book of Hours.”

“A small window, you say. Is it barred?”

“No; but our room is very high up in the tower.”

“Still, if one got through the window — is it large enough for that?”

“One might get through; but the moat is beneath — far beneath.”

“The window looks toward Montoire, then, if the moat is beneath.”

“Yes; we can see the sunset.”

“At all events, a person dropping from the window would alight outside the walls of the chateau?”

“Yes, Monsieur, — in the moat, as I said. It would be a long drop, too. I don’t know how high up the room is. It seems a great many steps up the winding stairs before one comes to the landing before the door.”

“Is it at the top of the tower, then?”

“No; for beyond our door the stairs begin again, and they seem to wind more steeply.”

“You noticed the sunset. Then you must have been there yesterday evening.”

“Yes; we were taken there shortly after noon yesterday. That was the limit to the time given the Countess in which to prove her innocence. She was summoned to the picture gallery by the Count himself, and nobody else was there but Captain Ferragant. The door was closed against me, and what passed between that saint and those two devils I know not; but after a little the door was opened, and there she was, very pale and with her eyes raised in prayer. The Count, who was blue with vindictiveness, told me to get together what things Madame should order; and when that was done, he bade us follow, and led the way down to the court-yard and to the tower, the Captain walking behind. As we climbed those narrow winding steps, I wished the Count might trip in the half-darkness and break his neck, but alas, it was only poor Madame who stumbled now and then. The Count showed us into the room, already furnished for us, and waited till a man had brought the trunk in which I had put some of Madame's clothes. The Count left without a word, and we heard the door locked outside. At first I thought we were to be left to starve, but after



some hours the door was unlocked by a man on guard outside, and Brigitte appeared with our supper. She told us she was to come twice a day with our food, and for other necessary services. And when she came again this morning, I had planned how I should manage to see you."

"You are as clever as you are true, Mathilde."

"Fortunately Brigitte looks such a simple, witless creature that the man on guard on the landing has not thought to pry while she has been with us, and has allowed the door to be shut. He cannot then see in, as the grated opening has been closed, out of regard to Madame's sex. So this morning I got Brigitte's consent to my plan, for the poor girl is the softest-hearted creature in the world. And to make sure of finding you immediately when I got out, I charged her to tell you to be in your room at four o'clock."

"Which she did very adroitly."

"She is not such a fool as some take her for. Well, when she came to us awhile ago, I transferred this frock and cap from her to me, and had her call out to the guard that she had forgotten something and must return to the kitchen for it. 'Very well, beauty,' said the guard ironically, and I came out in a great hurry, and was on my way downstairs before he could take a second look at me. The land-

ing is a dark place, and my figure so much like Brigitte's that her clothes make it look quite the same. There is another man on guard, at the bottom of the stairs, but he was as easily deceived as the one above. I ran across the two court-yards, and through the kitchen passage to the servants' stairs, and nobody glanced twice at me. Brigitte, of course, must stay with Madame till I return, — and now, Monsieur, it is time I was back, and I have said nothing of what I came to say."

"You have said much that is important. But 'tis true, you'd best say the rest quickly, — your return may be dangerous enough."

"Oh, I shall go so fast that nobody will have time to suspect me. As for the guards, it is their duty to keep me in. Should they see it is I who was out, they will be very glad to have me in again, and to hold their tongues, for the Count's punishments are not light. But as to Madame's message — she would have tried to convey it by Brigitte, had I not declared I would come at all hazards, — for the truth is, I have something to say on my own responsibility, also."

"But Madame's message?" I demanded eagerly.

"She begs that you will go away while you can. So brave a young gentleman should not stay here to risk the Count's vengeance."

I felt joy at this concern for my safety.

“If I am a brave man,” I answered, “I can only stay and help her.”

“I am glad you are of that mind, Monsieur, for it is what I think. That is what *I* had to say to you.”

“Then the only question is, how can I be of use to the Countess? She must be released from this imprisonment.”

“There I agree with you again. She ought to be taken away — far out of reach of the Count’s vengeance — before he has time to make her plight worse than it is, or carry out any design against her life. But even if she remained as she is, her health would not long endure it.”

“Now that matters have come to this pass, no doubt she is willing to run away.”

“Not yet, Monsieur. That is for me to persuade her. But if we form some plan of escape now, I hope I can win her consent before the time comes to carry it out.”

“I trust so. When she repelled the idea of escape, the day I saw her in the garden, things had not gone so far. And then she thought there was no safe place of refuge for her. But I can find a place. And she thought an attempt must be hopeless because the Count would be swift to pursue. But if we got some hours’ start, going at night — ”

“Yes, certainly it will have to be at night, Monsieur. The Count has the roads watched from the tower, for some purpose of his own — I think he expects some enemy.”

“You still have the key to the postern?”

“It must be where I left it — buried under the rose-bush nearest the postern itself. But the first thing is, to get out of the room in the tower.”

“Certainly. It would not be possible for Madame to get out as you have done — by a disguise, I mean?”

“No, Monsieur. Brigitte is the only one who comes to us, with whom she might change clothes. And Madame is not at all of Brigitte’s figure — nor could she mimic Brigitte’s walk as I can. She could not act a part in the slightest degree. And I know that Madame would never consent to go and leave me behind to bear the Count’s wrath. We must all three go together. Besides Brigitte comes and goes in the daytime, and Madame must escape at night.”

“Yes, that is certain. It is hard to devise a plan in a moment. If I could think of it over night, and you come to me again to-morrow — but no, you may not be able to play this same trick again — the guards may detect you going back.”

“That is true, and I have thought of one plan, though it may be difficult.”

“Let me hear it, nevertheless.”

“Then listen, Monsieur. First, as to the door of our cell. It is locked with a key, which the Count himself retains, except when he goes out, as this afternoon, — it is then entrusted to the seneschal. I know this from Brigitte, for the key is given to her when she comes to us. She hands it to the guard on the landing, who opens the door and keeps the key while she is within. When she leaves us, he locks the door, and she takes the key back to the Count or seneschal. But in order to release Madame, you must have that key.”

“And how am I to get it?”

“After Brigitte’s last visit to us before the night we select, she will give the Count or seneschal, not the real key to our cell, but another of the same size and general shape — she has access to unimportant keys about the house. Then she will bring the real key to you.”

“But poor Brigitte! — when the Count investigates in the morning, he will find she has given him the wrong key.”

Mathilde thought a moment. “No; he will rather suppose you robbed him of the right key during the night and substituted the other to delay discovery. He will suspect anything rather than Brigitte, whom he thinks too great a fool for the

least craft; and even if she is accused, she can play the innocent, I assure you."

"So much for that, then. There is yet the door of entrance to the tower."

"At present it has an old broken key in the lock, which is therefore useless. But no doubt that will be remedied — so we must act soon. Meanwhile, that door is guarded by the man at the foot of the stairs."

"But are the two guards on duty at night also? There is no Brigitte to be let in and out then. And surely the Count doesn't think you can break your lock."

"There are guards on duty, nevertheless. Last night I heard one call down the stairs to another, asking the time. They are there, no doubt, not for fear of our breaking out, but for fear of somebody breaking in to help Madame. I don't suppose there are ever more than two. If the rule has not been changed, the rest of the household sleeps, except a porter in the gate-house and a man on top of the tower. But this man watches the roads, as well as he can in the darkness, and the porter too is more concerned about people who might want to enter the chateau than about what goes on inside. So in the dead of night you can go silently downstairs and let yourself out of the hall —"

"But is not the hall door locked with a key?"

“ Yes ; but the key is left always in the lock. You have then only to cross the two court-yards to the tower, without making any noise to alarm the porter at the gate-house or to warn the guard at the tower entrance.”

“ Will he be inside or outside the tower door, I wonder ? ”

“ Probably inside, where there is a bench just at the foot of the stairs. He and his comrade above will be your only real difficulty, Monsieur. If you can take them by surprise, one at a time — ”

“ One at a time, or two at a time,” said I, beginning to walk up and down the chamber, and grasping my sword and dagger. “ But the trouble will be, the noise that may be made when I encounter them, — it may arouse the chateau and spoil all.”

“ But heaven may grant that you will surprise the men inside the tower, one at the foot of the stairs, the other on our landing, as they must have been last night. In that case, if you can keep the fighting inside the tower, till — ”

“ Till they are dead. Yes, in that case, if I am expeditious, no noise may be heard outside. That is a thing to aim for. If they, or one, should be outside, I can rush in and so draw them after me. Well, and when I have done for them — ? ”

“ Then you have but to unlock our door, and

Madame and I will join you. — You will know our door by there being a stool in the landing before it — the guard sits there. — Well, then we must fly silently through the court-yards and the hall, let ourselves out to the terrace — there are two or three ways I know, — and run through the garden to the postern. Once out of these walls, we must hurry across the fields to the house of a certain miller — ”

“ Hugues? Yes.”

“ Yes, Monsieur. The watchman on the tower will not see us in the fields, for we shall keep close to the woods till we are at a distance. Hugues can supply two horses, at least, and you and Madame must be as far away as possible by daylight.”

“ And you, Mathilde? ”

“ Unless we can get three horses, I will lie hid at Hugues’s mill till Madame finds time to send for me. It will be suitable enough — Hugues and I are to be married some day.”

“ But I have a horse at the inn at Montoire. If I can get it out at that hour, you can come with us — to whatever place we may decide upon.”

“ As to that place, you may consider in the meanwhile. There will be time to discuss the matter with Madame when she is escaping with you. The first thing is, to get as far from Lavardin as possible. And now when is all this to be done? ”



“The sooner the better, for who knows when the Count may take into his head some new idea?”

“Yes, of harm to Madame or to yourself.”

“Why should we not choose this very night?”

“I see no reason against it — except that I may not be able to persuade Madame. But yet there will be several hours — and surely heaven will help me! — Yes, to-night! There is nothing for me to do but persuade Madame, and see that we are dressed as suitably for travel as the clothes at hand will permit. But first, before Brigitte comes away, I must instruct her about the key. At what hour will you come, Monsieur?”

“As soon as the house is asleep.”

“Fortunately, early hours are kept here, as there is never any company. But the Count and the Captain stay at their cups till ten or eleven o’clock.”

“Then by that time they must have drunk enough to make them fall asleep as soon as they are in bed.”

“And sometimes before they are in bed, I have heard the servants say.”

“Then I will leave my room at half-past eleven, but will make sure that the hall is dark and empty before I proceed.”

“And may the saints aid you, Monsieur, when you have to do with the men at the tower!”

“The men will not be expecting me, that is one

advantage," said I, trying to seem calm, but trembling with excitement. "If all goes well, we should be out of the chateau soon after midnight."

"And at Hugues's house before one o'clock. You should be on horseback — the Countess and you — by half-past one. Have you money, Monsieur?"

"Yes, — this purse is nearly as full as when I left home."

"That is well, for Madame has none, and I don't know how much Hugues could get together in ten minutes. I have ten crowns in his strong-box, which Madame shall have."

"They shall stay in Hugues's strong-box, and his own money too. I have enough."

"Then I believe that is all, Monsieur, and I'd better be going back. Be on the watch for Brigitte with the key. Do you think of anything else?"

We went hurriedly over the various details of the plan, and then she took her leave, darting along the passage as swiftly as a greyhound and as silently as a ghost. I sat down to think upon what I had undertaken, but my mind was in a whirl. Strangely enough, I, the victor of a single duel, did not shrink from the idea of killing the two guards — or as many as there might be. Perhaps this was because they were sure to be rascals whose lives one could not value very highly, especially as against that of

the Countess. Nor did I feel greatly the odds against me, in regard both to their number and to my inexperience in such business. Perhaps the apparent confidence of Mathilde in my ability to dispose of them — a confidence based on my being a gentleman and they underlings — infected me. And yet I chose not to go too deeply into the probabilities. My safest course, for my courage, was not to think too much, but to wait for the moment and then do my best.

It seemed but a short time till there was a tap at my door, and in came the real Brigitte.

“Mathilde got back safe, Monsieur; she was not detected,” she said, and handed me a large key.

Ere more could pass, she was gone. I put the key in my breast pocket. It was now time I should show myself to the Count and his friend at table; which I proceeded to do, as boldly as if I had entertained no design against them. They were just back from their ride. It was strange with what outward coolness I was able to carry myself, by dint of not thinking too closely on what I had undertaken. For observe that, besides the immediate task of the night, there was Madame’s whole future involved. And how precipitately Mathilde and I had settled upon our course, without pausing to consider if some more prudent measures might not be taken to the same

end! But I was hurried by my feeling that I ought to save Madame, the more because no one could say how far the present situation was due to my having killed De Merri, and to my advent at the chateau. Even though she might choose not to escape, it was for me to give her the opportunity, at least. And to tell the truth, I longed to see her again, at any cost. As for Mathilde, there were her pressing fears of a worse fate for her mistress, to excuse her haste. And we were both young, and thought that any project which goes straight and smoothly in the telling must go straight and smoothly in the doing; and we looked not far ahead.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE WINDING STAIRS

I LEFT the table early, and went to my room. I tore two strips from the sheet of my bed, and wrapped them around my boots so as to cover the soles and deaden my footsteps. Slowly the night came, with stars and a moon well toward the full. But we could keep in shadow while about the chateau, and the light would aid our travelling later. At half-past ten o'clock, the house seemed so still I thought the Count must have gone to bed before his usual time. I stole noiselessly from my room, feeling my way; and partly down the stairs. But when I got to the head of the lower flight, I saw that the hall was still lighted. I peered over the railing. The Count and the Captain were alone, except for two knaves who sat asleep on their bench at the lower end of the hall. The Count lounged limply back in his great chair at the head of the table, unsteadily holding a glass of wine; and the

Captain leaned forward on the board, narrowly regarding the Count. Both were well gone in wine, the Count apparently the more so. There was a look of mental torment on the Count's face.

"Yes, I know, I know," he said, wincing at his own words as if they pierced him. "There was opportunity enough with that De Merri. I was blind then. And with this new puppy! Women and lovers have the ingenuity of devils in devising opportunities. And they both admit their interview in the garden. But that he could have his way so soon — is that entirely probable?"

He looked at the Captain almost beseechingly, as if for a spark of hope.

The Captain spoke with the calm certainty of wisdom gained through a world of experience:

"Young blood is quickly stirred. Young lips are quickly drawn to one another. Young arms are quick to reach out, and young bodies quick to yield to them."

The Count uttered a cry of pain and wrath, his eyes fixed as though upon the very scene the Captain imagined.

"The wretches!" said the tortured Count, staggering to his feet. "And I am the Count de Lavardin!"

"The greater nobleman you, the greater con-



“‘THE WRETCHES!’ SAID THE TORTURED COUNT, STAGGER-  
ING TO HIS FEET.”





quest for a young nobody to boast of. It is a fine thought for adventurous youth, — ‘A great lord, and a rich, but it is I, an unknown stripling, who really have possessed what he thinks his dearest treasure.’ ”

The Count gave a kind of agonized moan, and went lurching across the hall, spilling some wine from his glass. “And a man of my years, too!” he said, with an accent of self-pity.

“The older the husband, the merrier the laugh at his expense,” said the Captain.

The Count ground his teeth, and muttered to himself.

“It is always their boasting that betrays them,” went on the Count. “When I was young, they used to tell of a famous love affair between the Bussy d’Amboise of that day and the Countess de Montsoreau, wife of the Grand-huntsman. It came out through Bussy’s writing to the King’s brother that he had stolen the hind of the Grand-huntsman. That is how these young cocks always speak of their conquests.

“Ah, I remember that. He did the right thing, that Montsoreau! He forced his false wife to make an appointment with Bussy, and when Bussy came, it was a dozen armed men who kept the appointment, and the gay lover died hanging from a

window. Yes, that Montsoreau! — but he should have killed the woman too! The perfidious creatures! Mon dieu! — when I married her — when she took the vows — she was the picture of fidelity — I could have staked my soul that she was true; that from duty alone she was mine always, only mine!”

He lamented not as one hurt in his love, but as one outraged in his right of possession and in his dignity and pride. And curiously enough, his last words caused a look of jealousy to pass across the face of the Captain. This look, unnoticed by the Count, and speedily repressed, came to me as a revelation. It seemed to betray a bitter envy of the Count's mere loveless and unloved right of possession; and it bespoke the resolve that, if the Captain might not have her smiles, not even her husband might be content in his rights. Such men will give a woman to death rather than to any other man. As in a flash, then, I saw his motive in working upon the Count's insane jealousy. Better the Count should kill her than that even the Count should possess her. I shuddered to think how near to murder the Count had been wrought up but a moment since. At any time his impulse might pass the bounds. I now understood Mathilde's apprehensions, and saw the need for haste in removing the Countess far

from the power of this madman and his malign instigator.

The Count, exhausted by his rush of feelings, drained his glass, and almost immediately gave way to the sudden drowsiness which befalls drinkers at a certain stage. He staggered to his seat, and fell back in a kind of daze, the Captain watching him with cold patience. Thinking they would soon be going to bed, I slipped back to my room.

A little after eleven, I went forth again. The hall was now dark, and its silence betokened desertion. I groped my way to the door. The key turned more noisily than I should have wished, and there was a bolt to undo, which grated; but I heard no sound of alarm in the house. I stepped out to the court-yard, closing the door after me. The court-yard was bathed in moonlight. Keeping close to the house, so as not to be visible from any upper window, I gained the shadow of the wall separating the two court-yards. As noiselessly as a cat, I followed that wall to its gateway; entered the second court-yard, and saw that the door to the tower was open, a faint light coming from it. The tower itself, obstructing the moon's rays, threw its shadow across the paving-stones. I stepped into that shadow, which was only partial; drew my sword and dagger, and darted straight for the

tower entrance, stopping just inside the doorway. By the light of a lantern hanging against the wall, I saw a kind of small vestibule, beyond which was an inner wall, and at one side of which was the beginning of a narrow spiral staircase, that ran up between walls until it wound out of sight. On a bench against the inner wall I have mentioned, sat a man, who rose at sight of me, with one hand grasping a sword, and with the other a pike that was leaning against the bench.

He was a heavy, squat fellow, with short, thick legs and short, thick arms.

“I give you one chance for your life,” said I quickly. “Help me to escape with your prisoner, and leave the Count’s service for mine.”

After a moment’s astonishment, the man grunted derisively, and made a lunge at my breast with his pike. I caught the pike with my left hand, still holding my dagger therein, and forced it downward. At the same time I thrust with my rapier, but he parried with his own sword. I thrust instantly again, and would have pinned him to the wall if he had not sprung aside. He was now with his back to the stairs, and neither of us had let go the pike. His sword-point darted at me a second time, but I avoided, and thrust in return. Not quite ready to parry, he escaped by falling back upon the

narrow stone steps. Before I could attack, he was on his feet again, and on the second step. We still held to the pike, which troubled me much, both as an impediment to free sword-play and as depriving me of the use of my dagger. I suddenly fell back, trying to jerk it from his grasp; but his grip was too firm. He jerked the pike in turn, and I let go, thinking the unexpected release might cause him a fall.

He did not fall; but I pressed close with sword and dagger before he could bring the pike to use, and he backed further up the stairs. He caught the pike nearer the point, that he might wield it better at close quarters; but the long handle made it an awkward weapon, by striking against the wall, which continually curved behind him. We were sword to sword, and against my dagger he had his pike, but the dagger was the freer weapon for defence though not so far-reaching for attack.

The man was very strong, but he had the shorter thrust and offered the broader target. We continued at it, thrust and parry, give and take. All the time he retreated up the winding staircase, which was so narrow that we had little elbow room, and this was to his advantage as he needed less than I. Another thing soon came to his advantage: the stairs curved out of the light cast by the lantern

below, so that he backed into darkness, yet I was still visible to him. I cannot tell by what sense I knew where to meet his sword-point, yet certainly my dagger rang against it each time it would have stung me out of the dark. As for his pike, I now kept it busy enough in meeting my own thrusts. Whether or not I was drawn by the knowledge that the Countess was above, I continued to attack so incessantly, and with such good reach, that my antagonist still retreated upward. I followed him into the darkness; and then the advantage was with me, as being slender.

Hitherto I had offered him my full front, but now I half turned my back to the wall, so that his blade might scarce find me at all, and that I might stand less danger of being forced backward off my feet. Well, so we prodded the darkness with our steel feelers in search of each other's bodies on those narrow stairs, striking sparks from the stone walls which our weapons were bound to meet by reason of the continual curvature.

At last the broad form of my adversary was suddenly thrown into faint light by a narrow window in the wall. I staked all upon one swift thrust. It caught him full in the belly, and ran how far up his body I know not. With a cry he fell forward, and I was hard put to it to save my

sword and avoid going down with him. But I got myself and my sword free, and went on up the stairs as fast as I could feel my way.

In a few moments I heard steps coming from above, and a rough voice shouting down, "Ho, Gaspard, did you call? What the devil's up?" It was the other guard, who must have been asleep to have been deaf to the clash of our weapons, but whom his comrade's death-cry had roused. I trusted that the walls of the tower had confined that death-cry from the chateau; fortunately, the narrow window was toward the open fields.

I stopped where I was. When the man's steps sounded a few feet from me, I said "Halt!" and, telling him his comrade was dead, proposed the terms I had offered the latter. There was a moment's silence: then a clicking sound, and finally a great flash of fiery light with a loud report, and the smell of smoke. By good luck I had flattened myself against the wall before speaking, and the charge whizzed past me. Thinking the man might have another pistol in readiness, I stood still. But he turned and ran up the stairs. I stumbled after him.

Presently the stairway curved into light such as we had left at the bottom. The guard ran on in the light, and finally stepped forth to a landing no

wider than the stairs; where there hung a lantern over a three-legged stool, beyond which was a door. At sight of this my heart bounded.

At the very edge of the landing the man turned and faced me, pointing a second pistol. As the wheel moved, I dropped forward. The thing missed fire entirely, and, flinging it down with a curse, the man drew his sword and seized a pike that stood against the wall. I charged recklessly up the steps, bending my body to avoid the pike. It went through my doublet, just under the left armpit. Ere he could disencumber it I pressed forward upon the landing. I turned his sword with my dagger, and thrust with my own sword under the pike, piercing his side. Only wounded, he leaped back, drawing the pike from my clothes. He aimed at me again with that weapon. In bending away from it, I fell on my side, but instantly turned upon my back.

The man moved to stand over me. I let go my sword, and caught the pike in my hand as it descended. He then tried to spit me with his sword, but I checked its point with the guard of my dagger. I thought I was near my end. He had only to draw up his sword for another downward thrust; but there was a sudden faltering, or hesitation, in his movements, probably a blindness of his eyes,



the effect of his wound. In that instant of his uncertainty, I swung my dagger around and ran it through his leg. He fell forward upon me, nearly driving the breath out of my body. My dagger arm, extended as it had been, was fortunately free. I crooked my elbow, embraced my adversary, and sank the dagger deep into his back. I felt his quiver of death.

After I had rolled his body off me, and sheathed my sword and dagger, I took out the key and unlocked the door. Inside the vaulted room of stone, which was lighted by a candle, stood the Countess and Mathilde.

The Countess, beautiful in her pallor, and looking more angel than woman in the plain robe of blue that clothed her slight figure, met me with a face of mingled reproach, pity, and horror. Mathilde was in tears and utterly downcast. I could see at a glance how matters stood, and ere I had made two steps beyond the threshold, I stopped, abashed.

“Oh, Monsieur, the blood!” cried the Countess sadly, pointing to my doublet.

“It is that of your two guards,” I said. “I am not hurt.”

“I am glad you are not hurt. But oh, why did you put this bloodshed upon your soul?”

“To save you, Madame.”

“Alas, I know. It is not for me to blame you — but could you think I would escape — leave the house of my husband — become a fugitive wife?”

I saw how firm she was in her resolution for all her fragility of body, and I scarce knew what to say.

“Madame, think! He is your husband, yes, — but your persecutor. Where you should have protection, you receive — this.” I waved my hand about her prison. “Where you should find safety, you are in mortal danger.”

“I know all that, Monsieur, — have known it from the first. But shall I play the runaway on that account? Think what you propose — that I, a wedded wife, shall fly from my husband’s roof with a gentleman who is not even of kin to me! Then indeed would my good name deserve to suffer.”

“But Madame, heaven knows, as I do, that you are the truest of wives.”

“Then let me still deserve that title as my consolation, whatever I may have to endure.”

“But to flee from such indignity as this — such slander — such peril of death — ”

“It is for me to bear these things,” she interrupted, “if he to whom I vowed myself in marriage

inflicts them upon me. If they be wrongs, it is I who must suffer but not I who must answer to heaven for them. I may be sinned against, but I will not sin. Though he fail in a husband's duty, I will not fail in a wife's. Do you not understand, Monsieur, it is not the things done to us, but the things we do, that we are accountable for?"

"But I can see no sin in your fleeing from the evils that beset you here, Madame."

"Nay, even if it were not a violation of my marriage vow, it would have the appearance of sin, and that we are to avoid. And it would be to throw away my one hope, that my husband's heart may yet be softened, and his eyes opened to my innocence."

"Alas! I trust it may turn out a true hope, Madame," said I sadly.

"Heaven has caused such things to occur before now," she replied. "As for you, Monsieur, I must never cease to thank you for your chivalrous intent, as I shall thank my good Mathilde for her devotion. And I will ever pray for you. And now, if you would make my lot easier — if you would remove one anxiety from my heart, and give me one solace — you will leave this chateau immediately. Save yourself, I beg, Monsieur: let there be no more blood shed on my account, and that blood yours!

Mathilde can let you out at the postern — she knows where the key is hidden. She tells me you have a horse at Montoire. Go, Monsieur — lose not another moment — I implore — nay, if you will recognize me as mistress of this house, I command.”

I bowed low. She offered me her hand: I kissed it.

“It will not be necessary for Mathilde to come to the postern,” said I. “I know another way out of the chateau. Adieu, Madame!” It was all I could manage to say without the breaking of my voice. I turned and left the room, closing the door that the Countess and Mathilde might be spared the sight of the body on the landing. I then, for a reason, took the key, leaving the door unlocked. I groped my way down the stairs, taking care not to trip over the body below. I crossed the courtyards without any care for secrecy, entered the hall, and sat down upon a bench near the door.

When I had told the Countess I knew another way out of the chateau, I meant only the front gateway. But I did not intend immediately to try that way. I intended, for a purpose which had suddenly come into my head, to wait in the hall till morning and be the first to greet the Count when he appeared.

## CHAPTER X.

### MORE THAN MERE PITY

WHAT I stayed to do was something the Countess herself could do, and probably would do one way or another, if indeed mere circumstances would not do it of themselves: though I felt that none could as I could. But to tell the truth, even if I could not have brought myself to turn my back on that place while she was in such unhappy plight there.

After I had sat awhile in the hall, I went to my room, lighted a candle, and cleansed myself and my weapons, and my clothes as well as I could, of blood. Having put myself to rights, though the rents in my doublet were still gaping, I went back to the bench in the hall, and passed the rest of the night there, sleeping and awake by turns.

At dawn I heard steps and voices in the courtyard as of early risen dependents starting the day. Silence returned for a few minutes, and then came

the noise of hurrying feet, and of shouts. There was rapid talk between somebody in the court-yard and somebody at an upper window. I knew it meant that the bodies of the two guards had been discovered, doubtless by the men who had gone to relieve them. In a short time, down the stairs came the Count de Lavardin, his doublet still unfastened, followed by two body-servants. He came in haste toward the front door, but I rose and stood in his path.

“A moment, Monsieur Count. There’s no need of haste. You’ll find your prisoner safe enough.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, having stopped in sheer wonder at my audacity.

“Madame the Countess has not flown, though it is true her guards are slain — I slew them. And Madame the Countess will not fly, though it is true her prison door is unlocked — I unlocked it — with this key, which I borrowed from you last night.”

He took the key I handed him, and stared at it in amazement. He then thrust his hand into his doublet pocket and drew out another key, which he held up beside the first, looking from one to the other.

“Yes,” said I, “that is a different key, which I left in place of the right one so that you might not discover the loan too soon.”

He gazed at me with a mixture of fury and surprise, as at an antagonist whose capacity he must have previously underrated.

“By the horns of Satan,” he exclaimed, “you are the boldest of meddling imps.”

“I have meddled to good purpose,” said I, “though my meddling has not turned out as I planned. But it has turned out so as to bring you peace of mind, at least in one respect.”

“What are you talking of?”

“You see that I possessed myself of that key; that I fought my way to the prison of the Countess; that I threw open her prison door.”

“And believe me, you shall pay for your ingenuity and daring, my brave youth.”

“All that was but the beginning of what I was resolved and able to do. I had prepared our way of escape from the château.”

“I am not sure of that.”

“You may laugh with your lips, Count, but I laugh at you in my heart. Don’t think Monsieur de Pepicot is the only man who can get out of the Chateau de Lavardin.”

The reminder somewhat sobered the Count.

“I had the means, too,” I went on, “to fly with Madame far from this place. We might indeed have been a half-day’s ride away by this time. I assure

you it is true. Let what I have done convince you of what more I could have done. You don't think I should have gone so far as I have, unless I was sure of going further, do you?"

The Count shrugged his shoulders, pretending derision, but he waited for me.

"And why did I not go further?" I continued. "Because the Countess would not. Because she is the truest of wives. Because, when I opened her door, she met me with a stern rebuke for supposing her capable of flying from your roof. Ah, Monsieur, it would have set your mind at rest, if you had heard her. She bows to your will, though it may crush her, because you are her husband. Never was such pious fidelity to marriage vows. Her only hope is that your mind may be cleared of its false doubts of her."

The Count looked impressed. He had become thoughtful, and a kind of grateful ease seemed to show itself upon his brow. I was pleasing myself with the belief that I had thus, in an unexpected way, convinced him of the Countess's virtue, when a voice at my side broke in upon my satisfaction. I had so closely kept my attention upon the Count that I had not observed Captain Ferragant come down the stairs. It was he that now spoke, in his cool, quiet, scoffing tone:



“Perhaps the Countess had less faith in this gentleman’s power to convey her safely away than he seems to have had himself. Perhaps she saw a less promising future for a renegade wife than he could picture to her. Perhaps she, too, perceived the value of her refusal to run away, as evidence of virtue in the eyes of a credulous husband.”

The Count’s forehead clouded again. I turned indignantly upon the Captain, but addressed my words to the Count, saying:

“Monsieur, you will pardon me, but it seems to a stranger that you allow this gentleman great liberties of speech. Men of honour do not, as a rule, even permit their friends to defame their wives.”

“This gentleman is in my confidence,” said the Count, his grey face reddening for a moment. “It is you, a stranger as you say, who have taken great liberties in speaking of my domestic affairs. But you shall pay for them, young gentleman. Your youth makes your presumption all the greater, and shall not make your punishment the less. I will trouble you, Captain, to see that he stays here till I return.”

At this the Count, motioning his attendants to follow, who had stood out of earshot of our lowered voices, passed on to the court-yard, and thence, of course, to the prison of the Countess.

The Captain stood looking at me with that expression of antipathy and ridicule which I always found it so hard to brook. I had some thought of defying the Count's last words and walking away to see what the Captain would do. But I reflected that this course must end in my taking down, unless I made good a sudden flight from the château by the gate; and if I made that I should be fleeing from the Countess. So the best thing was to be submissive, and not bring matters, as between the Count and me, to a crisis. Perhaps a way to help the Countess might yet occur, if I stayed upon the scene to avail myself of it. And in any case by continuing there in as much freedom as the Count might choose to allow me, I might have at least the chance of another sight of her.

So, while we waited half an hour or so in the hall, I gave the Captain no trouble, not even that of speech, which he disdained to take on his own initiative.

The Count returned, looking agitated, as if he had been in a storm of anger which had scarce had time to subside. His glance at me was more charged with hate and menace than ever before. He beckoned the Captain to the other end of the hall, and there they talked for awhile in undertones, the Count often shaking his head quickly, and taking short

walks to and fro; sometimes he clenched his fists, or breathed heavy sighs of irritation, or darted at me a swift look of malevolence and threat. I could only assume that something had passed between the Countess and him during his visit to her prison — perhaps she had shown anxiety as to whether I had fled — which had suddenly quickened and increased his jealousy of me.

At last the Count seemed to accept some course advised by his friend. He came towards me, the Captain following with slower steps. In a dry voice, well under control, the Count said to me :

“Permit me to relieve you, Monsieur, of the burden of those weapons you carry. I am annoyed that you should think it desirable to wear them in my house, as if it were the road.”

Startled, I put my hands on the hilts of my sword and dagger, and took a step backward.

“Your annoyance is somewhat strange, Monsieur,” said I, “considering that you and the Captain wear your swords indoors as well as out. I thought it was the custom of this house.”

“If so,” replied the Count, with his ghastly smile, “it is a custom that a guest forfeits the benefit of by killing two of my dependents. Come, young gentleman. Don’t be so rude as to make me ask twice.”

The Captain now stepped forward more briskly, his hand on his own sword. Taking his motion as a threatening one, and scarce knowing what to do, I drew my weapons upon impulse and presented, not the handles, but the points. But ere I could think, the Captain's long rapier flashed out, it moved so swiftly I could not see it, and my own sword was torn from my grip and sent whirring across the hall. In the next instant, the guard of the Captain's sword was locked against the guard of my dagger, and his left hand gripped my wrist. It was such a trick as a fencing master might have played on a new pupil, or as I had heard attributed to my father but had never seen him perform. It showed me what a swordsman that red Captain was, and how much I had yet to learn ere I dared venture against such an adversary. And there was his bold red-splashed face close to mine, smiling in derision of my surprise and discomfiture. He was beginning to exert his strength upon my wrist — that strength which had choked and flung away the great hound. To save my arm, I let go my dagger. The Captain put his foot on it till an attendant, whom the Count had summoned, stooped for it. My sword was picked up by another man, whereupon, at the Count's command, it was hung upon a peg in the wall, and the dagger attached to the handle of the sword.

The two men were then ordered to guard me, one at each side. They were burly fellows, armed with daggers.

“ Well, Monsieur, what next ? ” said I in as scornful a tone as I could command.

“ Patience, Monsieur ; you will see.”

There was a low, narrow door in the side of the hall, near the front. At the Count’s bidding, an attendant opened this, and I was marched into a very small, bare room, the ceiling of which was scarce higher than my head. This apartment had evidently been designed as a doorkeeper’s box. It’s only furniture was a bench. A mere eyehole of a window in the corner looked upon the court-yard.

“ Remember,” I called back to the Count, “ you cannot put injuries upon me with impunity. An account will be exacted in due time.”

“ Remember, you,” he replied with a laugh, “ that you have murdered two men here, and are subject to my sentence.”

My guards left me in the room, and stationed themselves outside the door, which was then closed upon me. There was no lock to the door, but it was possible to fasten the latch on the outside, and this was done, as I presently discovered by trial.

I sat on the bench, and gazed out upon as much of the court-yard as the window showed. Suddenly

the window was darkened by something placed against it outside, — a man's doublet propped up by a pike, or some such device. I could not guess why they should cut off my light, unless as a mere addition to the tediousness of my restraint. I disdained to show annoyance, though I might have thrust my arm through the window and displaced the obstruction. Later I saw the reason: it was to prevent my seeing who passed through the court-yard.

It seemed an hour until suddenly my door was flung open. In the doorway appeared the Captain, beckoning me to come forth. I did so.

Half-way up the hall, a little at one side, stood the Count. Near him, and looking straight toward me, sat the Countess in a great arm-chair. Besides the Captain and myself, those two were the only persons in the hall. Even my guards had disappeared, and all doors leading from the hall were shut.

The Countess, as I have said, was looking straight toward me. Her eyes had followed the Captain to my door, she wondering what was to come out of it. For assuredly she had not expected me to come out of it. She had still trusted that I had gone away in the night — the Count had not told her otherwise. Her surprise at seeing me was manifest in her startled look, which was followed by a low cry of compassionate regret.

The Count had been watching her with a painful intentness. He had not even turned his eyes to see me enter, having trusted to his ears to apprise him. At her display of concern, the skin of his face tightened; though that display was no more than any compassionate lady might have given in a similar case. Even the Count, after a moment, appeared to think more reasonably of her demeanour.

I bowed to her, and stood waiting for what might follow, the Captain near me.

The Count, turning toward me for an instant to show it was I he addressed, but fixing his gaze again upon his wife and keeping it there while he continued speaking to me, delivered himself thus, with mocking irony:

“Monsieur, I will not be so trifling or so churlish as to keep you in doubt regarding your fate. In this chateau, where the right of doom lies in me, you have been, by plain evidence and your own confession, guilty of the murder of two men. As to what other and worse crimes you have intended, I say nothing. What you have done is already too much. There is only one sufficient punishment. You may thank me for granting you time of preparation. I will give you two days — a liberal allowance, you will admit — during which you shall be

lodged in a secure place, where in solitude and quiet you may put yourself in readiness for death."

The Countess rose with a cry, "No, no!" Her face and voice were charged with something so much more than mere compassion, that I forgot my doom in a wild sweet exultation. At what he perceived, the Count uttered a fierce, dismayed ejaculation. The Captain looked at once triumphant and resentful.

"It is enough!" cried the Count hoarsely. "The truth is clear!"

He motioned me away, and the Captain pushed me back into the little room, quickly fastening the door. But my feeling was still one of ecstasy rather than horror, for still I saw the Countess's tender eyes in grief for me, still saw her arms reaching out toward me, still heard her voice full of wild protest at my sentence. It was to surprise her real feelings that she had been brought to hear, in my presence, my doom pronounced; and my window had been obstructed that our confrontation might be as sudden to me as to her, lest by a prepared look I might put her on her guard. This it was that the Captain had suggested, and excellently it had served. That moment's revelation of her heart, though it brought such sweetness into my soul, could only make her fate worse and my sentence irrevocable.



## CHAPTER XI.

### THE RAT - HOLE AND THE WATER - JUG

I HAD not been back in the little room a minute, when it occurred to me to reach through the window and displace the obstruction. I was in time to see the Countess escorted back across the court-yard by her husband. This could mean only that she was again to occupy her prison in the tower. I was glad at least to know where she was, that I might imagine her in her surroundings, of which I had obtained so brief a glimpse.

Presently my door opened slightly, that my breakfast might be passed in on a trencher; and again an hour later, that the trencher might be taken out. Soon after that, the door was thrown wide, and a man of some authority, whom I had already taken to be the seneschal of the chateau, courteously requested me to step forth. When I did so, he told me my lodging was ready and bade me follow. At my

elbows were two powerful armed servitors of this strange half-military household, to escort me.

I had a moment's hope that I might be taken to some chamber in the great tower; I should thus be nearer the Countess. But such was not the Count's will. I was conducted to the hall staircase, and up two flights, thence along the corridor past my former sleeping chamber, and finally by a small stairway to a sort of loft at that very corner of the château against which the great tower was built.

It was a small chamber with one window and an unceiled roof that sloped very low at the sides. I suppose it had been used as a store-room for rubbish. Two worm-eaten chests were its only furniture. On one of these were a basin, a jug of water, and a towel. On the other were a blanket, a sheet, and a pillow. Here then were my bed and wash-stand. There was still space left on the first chest to serve me as dining-table.

Before I could find anything to say upon these meagre accommodations for a gentleman's last lodging in this world, the seneschal bade me good-day, the door was closed and locked, and I was left to my reflections. The room not having been designed as a prison, there was no grilled opening in the door, and I was not exposed to the guard's view.

The Count might have kept me in my former

chamber, thought I, the time being so short. Perhaps he feared my making a rope of bed clothes and dropping to the terrace. As for the little room off the hall, it had no real lock, and the guards might become sleepy at night. But why did he make this respite of two days? Was it to give himself time for devising some peculiarly humiliating and atrocious form of death? Or was it mere ironical pretence of mercy in his justice, and might I be surprised with the fatal summons as soon as he was in the humour for it? To this day, I do not clearly know, — or whether he had other matters for his immediate care; or indeed whether, at the instant of pronouncing my sentence in order to discover the Countess's feelings, he actually intended carrying it out.

In any case, now that her heart had betrayed itself, I had little hope of mercy. What came nearest to daunting me was the thought that, if I died, my people might never know for certain what had been my fate, for the Count would probably keep my death a secret, his own dependents being silenced by interest and fear. Yet I felt I had no right to complain of Fate. I had come from home to see danger, and here it was, though my present adventure was something different from cutting off the moustaches of Brignan de Brignan. And still my emotions were

sweetened by the sense of what the Countess had disclosed, fatal though that disclosure might be to her also.

Such were the materials of my thoughts for the first hour or so, while I sat on the chest that was to be my bed. But suddenly there came a sharper consciousness of what death meant, and how closely it threatened me. I sprang up, to bestir myself in seeking if there might be some means of escape. The situation had changed since I had willingly lingered at the chateau in order to be near the Countess. The reluctance to betake myself from the place where she was, had not diminished; but I had awakened to the knowledge that my only hope of ever seeing her again lay in present flight, if that were possible. I could serve her better living than dead, better free than a prisoner.

I went to the window, which was wide enough for me to put my head out. My room was at the top of the building, and only the great tower, partly visible at my right, rose higher toward the sky. Below me was a narrow paved space between the house and the outer wall: it ran from the base of the tower at my right, to the garden, far at the left. Beyond the wall was the moat: beyond that, the country toward Montoire. If I could let myself down to the earth by any means, I should still be

on the wrong side of the wall. But I might find the postern key, buried under the rose bush near the postern itself.

I looked around the room, but there was nothing that would serve as a means of descent, except the bedding on the larger chest. This I examined: it was the scantiest, being merely a strip of blanket and a strip of sheet, together just sufficient to cover the top of the chest. With the pillow cover and towel, they would not reach half-way to the ground.

Perhaps the chests might contain old clothes, or other materials that would serve to eke out. I tried the lids, but both were strongly locked. The larger chest looked very ancient and rotten: its hinges might be loose. I pulled one end of it out from against the wall, to examine the back. The hinges were immovable. Despondent, I ran my hand further down the back at random, and, to my surprise, felt a small irregular hole, through which I could thrust two fingers. It was evidently a rat hole, for I saw now that when close to the wall, it must have corresponded to a chink between the stones thereof.

My fingers inside the chest came in contact with nothing but rat-bitten papers, to my sad disappointment. But, having gone so far, I was moved to continue until I had patiently twisted a few docu-

ments out through the hole. I straightened and glanced at them. The edges were fretted by the rats. One writing was an account of moneys expended for various wines; another was a list of remedies for the diseases of horses; but the third, when I caught its meaning and saw the name signed at the end, made my heart jump. It was the last page of a letter, and ran thus:

“One thing is certain, by our careful exclusion of fools and weaklings, our plot is less liable to premature discovery than any of those which have hitherto been attempted, and, as you say, if we fail we have but to lock ourselves up in our châteaux till all blows over, the K. being so busy at present with the Dutch. In that event, my dear Count, the Chateau de Lavardin is a residence that some of the rest of us will envy you. Your servant ever,

“COLLOT D’ARNIOL.”

The name was that of the chief mover of the late conspiracy, who had paid the penalty of his treason without betraying his accomplices. If this was indeed his signature, with which the authorities were certainly acquainted, the scrap of paper, were I free to carry it to Paris, would put the life of the Count de Lavardin in my hands.

To be possessed of such a weapon — such a means of rescuing the Countess from her fearful situation — and yet lack freedom wherein to use it, was too vexing for endurance. I resolved, rather than wait inactively for death with that weapon useless, to employ the most reckless means of escape. Meanwhile I pocketed the fragment of letter, and thrust the other papers back into the chest, which I then pushed to its former place.

After thinking awhile, I poured the water from the heavy earthen jug into the basin. I then sat down on the large chest, leaning forward, elbows upon knees, my head upon my hands, the empty jug beside me as if I had lazily left it there after drinking from it. In this attitude I waited through a great part of the afternoon, until I began to wonder if the Count was not going to send me any more food that day.

At last, when the sun was low, I heard my lock turned, the door opened into the room, and one of my new guards entered with a trencher of bread and cold meat. With the corner of my eye, I saw that nobody was immediately outside my door; so I assumed that my other guard, if there were still two, was stationed at the foot of the short flight of stairs leading to my room. The man with the food, having cast a look at me as I sat in my listless atti-

tude, passed me in order to put the trencher on the other chest, which was further from the door.

The instant his back was toward me, I silently grasped the earthen jug, sprang after him, and brought the jug down upon the back of his head with all my strength while he was leaning forward to place the trencher. He staggered forward. I gave him a second blow, and he sprawled upon the chest, which stopped his fall.

I ran to the open door, pushed it almost shut, and waited behind it, the jug raised in both hands. My blows and the guard's fall had not been without noise.

"Hola! what's that?" cried somebody outside and a little below. I gave no answer, and presently I heard steps rapidly mounting to my door. Then the door was lightly pushed, but I stopped it; whereupon the head of my other guard was thrust in through the narrow opening. Down came my jug, and the man dropped to his hands and knees, in the very act of drawing his weapons. I struck him again, laying him prostrate. Then I dragged him into the room, and tried to wrest his dagger from his grasp. Finding this difficult, I ran back to the first guard, took his dagger from its sheath as he was beginning to come to, wielded my jug once more to delay his awakening, and, stepping



over the second man's body, passed out of the room. The man with the trencher had left the key in the lock. I closed the door and turned the key, which I put in my pocket. I then hastened down the stairs, fled along the deserted passage, descended the main stairway to the story below, traversed without a moment's pause the rooms leading to the picture gallery, crossed that and found the door at the end unlocked, ran down the stairs of the Countess's former apartments, unlocked the door to the garden, and sped along the walk toward the postern. In all this, I had not seen a soul: I was carried forward by a bracing resolve to accomplish my escape or die in attempting it, as well as by an inspiring faith in the saying of the Latin poet that fortune favours the bold, and by a feeling that for me everything depended on one swift, uninterrupted flight.

I gained the postern; fell on my knees by the nearest rose bush, and, choosing a spot where the soil swelled a little, dug rapidly with the dagger, throwing the earth aside with my hand. In my impatience, much time seemed to go: I feared that here at last I was stayed: great drops fell from my brow upon my busy hands: I trembled and could have wept for vexation. But suddenly my dagger struck something hard, and in a moment I grasped the key. It opened the lock. I stood upon the ledge

outside, and re-locked the door; then dashed across the plank over the moat, and made for the forest.

I had no time to spare. My guards might be already returned to consciousness and doing their best to alarm the house from within their prison. Bloodhounds might soon be on my track. I ran along the edge of the forest, therefore, which covered my movements till I was past the village of St. Outille, close to Montoire. I then altered my pace to a walk, lest a running figure in the fields might attract the notice of the Count's watchman on the tower; and, going in the lurching manner of a rustic, came to a road by which I crossed the river and gained the town. I entered the inn, sought the host, and called for my bill, baggage, and horse.

The innkeeper did not recognize me at first, and, when he did, showed great wonder and curiosity at my absence. He was inclined to be friendly, though, and, when he perceived I was in haste, did not delay my departure with inquisitive talk. I saw that my horse had been properly cared for in my absence, and was glad to be on its back again, the more because I should thus leave no further scent for bloodhounds to follow.

I rode out of the archway and turned my horse toward the road for Les Roches and Paris. As I crossed the square, I could not help glancing over

my right shoulder toward the Lavardin road. In doing so, I happened to see a young man coming out of the church, whose face I knew. I thought a moment, then reined my horse around to intercept him, and, as he was about to pass, said in a low voice :

“ Good evening, Hugues.”

He stopped in surprise, recalling my features but not my identity. I leaned over my horse’s neck, and spoke in an undertone :

“ You will remember I met you on your way back from Sablé, whither you had carried a certain lady’s message. I have since heard of you from that lady. She is in a most unhappy plight, and so is her maid Mathilde.”

The young miller turned pale at this.

“ I have just escaped from the château,” I continued, “ where the Count meant to kill me. I am going as fast as possible to Paris, where I can use means to render him powerless. But that will take time, and meanwhile the worst may befall the Countess — and no doubt her faithful Mathilde also. They are imprisoned in the tower. I thank God I have met you, for now there is one friend here to whose solicitude I may leave that unfortunate lady and her devoted maid while I am away.”

“ Monsieur,” said he, with deep feeling, “ I know

no reason why you should play a trick on me, and you don't look as if you were doing so. I will trust you, therefore. But can you not come to my house, where we can talk fully?"

"Where is your house?"

"About a quarter of a league down that road." He pointed toward the road that ran northward from the square, as my road ran northeastward. "When you are ready to go on, you can get the Paris road by a lane, without coming back to the town."

There were good reasons against my losing any time before starting for Paris. But it was well, on the other hand, for Hugues to know exactly how matters stood at the château. I put my reasons hastily to him, and he said he could promise me a safe hiding-place at his mill. And I could travel the faster in the end for a rest now, which I looked as if I needed, — in truth, I had slept little and badly in the hall the previous night, and the day's business had told upon me. So, perhaps most because it was pleasant to be with a trusty companion who shared my cause of anxiety, I agreed to go to his house for supper, and to set out after night-fall.

"Good!" said Hugues. "Then you had best ride ahead, Monsieur, so we are not seen together. You can leave me now as if you had been merely

asking your way. If you ride slowly when you are out of the town, I shall catch up."

I did as he suggested, and he soon overtook me on the road. His house proved to be a cottage of good size built against a mill, with a small barn at one side of the yard and a stable at the other. When I had dismounted at his door, we unsaddled and unbridled my horse, so that it might pass for a new horse of his own if pursuers looked into his stable. He then called his boy and his woman-servant, and told them what to say if anybody came inquiring. We carried my saddle, bridle, and portmanteau through the cottage to the mill, and thence to a small cellar which was reached by means of a well-concealed trap-door in the mill-floor. This cellar should be my refuge in case the Count's men came there seeking me.

"I made this hiding-place," said Hugues, moving his candle about to show how well floored and walled it was, "because one could never say when Mathilde, living in that fearful château, might want a place to fly to. She would not leave her mistress, you know, though the Countess's other women went gladly enough when the Count sent them off. Nobody knows there is anything between Mathilde and me, Monsieur, — except the Countess. It is safer so. We have been waiting for the Count to die, so

that all might be well with the Countess, for Mathilde could marry me then with easy mind."

"I hope that God will send that time soon," said I.

"But meanwhile, this present danger?" said Hugues.

We returned to the living-room of the cottage, and talked of the matter while we had supper. I told Hugues everything, misrepresenting only so far as to make it appear that the Count's jealousy was still entirely unfounded, and that he had mistaken the Countess's feelings at our confrontation. Whatever Hugues may have thought upon this last point, he made no comment thereon; but he showed the liveliest sense of the increased danger in which the Countess stood. He feared that my escape would make her position still worse, and that her hours might be already numbered. He considered there was not time for me to go to Paris and return: the Countess's rescue ought to be attempted promptly, or the attempt would be too late.

In all this, he but echoed the feeling that had come back to me with double force while I told him the situation. But there was the Countess's determination not to flee. Hugues said that as this determination must be overcome for the Countess's own sake, any pressure that could be brought to bear

upon her feelings would be justifiable. Let it be urged upon her that if she persisted in waiting for death, Mathilde's life also would doubtless be sacrificed; let every argument, every persuasion be employed; let me beseech, let me reproach, let me even use imperative means if need be. Suddenly, as he talked, I saw a way by which I thought she might be moved. It was one chance, but enough to commit me to the effort.

The question now was, how to communicate with the Countess, and to accomplish the rescue. This Hugues and I settled ere we went to bed. I slept that night in the mill, by the trap-door. Hugues lay awake, listening for any alarm. None came, and in the morning we agreed that either the Count had elected not to seek me at all, or had traced me to the inn, and, learning I had taken horse, supposed I was far out of the neighbourhood. I stayed indoors all that day, while Hugues was absent in furtherance of our project, the woman and boy being under strict orders as to their conduct in the event of inquiries. In the evening Hugues returned with various acquisitions, among them being a sword for me, and a long rope ladder, both obtained at Troo.

We awaited the fall of night, then set out, I upon my horse, Hugues riding one of his and leading the other. We went by obscure lanes, crossed the river,

gained the forest, and lingered in its shades till the church clock of Montoire struck eleven. We then proceeded through the forest, near the edge, till we were behind the Château de Lavardin.

Besides the rope-ladder, we had with us a cross-bow that Hugues owned, a long slender cord, and a paper on which I had written some brief instructions during the afternoon.



## CHAPTER XII.

### THE ROPE LADDER

THE night was starlit, though the moon would come later. We hoped to be away from the chateau before it rose. There was a gentle breeze, which we rather welcomed as likely to cover what little noise we might make.

Leaving our horses tied in the forest, and taking the cross-bow and other things, we stole along the moat skirting the Western wall, till we were opposite the great tower. It rose toward the sky, sheer from the black water that separated us from it by so few yards. We gazed upward, and I pointed out the window which I thought, from its situation, must be that of the Countess, if she still occupied her former prison.

Our first plan depended upon her still occupying that prison, or some other with an unbarred window in that side of the tower; and upon her being still accompanied by Mathilde.

If the man on top of the tower were to look down now, thought I! We had considered that chance. It was not likely he would come to the edge of the tower and look straight down. His business apparently was to watch the road at a distance and in both directions. He could do this best from the Northeastern part of the tower. From what I knew now, I could guess why the Count had stationed him there: a conspirator never knows when he is safe from belated detection and a visit of royal guards. This accounted also, perhaps as much as the Count's jealousy, for his inhospitality to strangers, and for the half-military character of his household.

Hugues uttered a bird-call, which had been one of his signals to Mathilde in their meetings. We waited, looking up and wishing the night were blacker. He repeated the cry.

Something faintly whitish appeared in the dark slit which I had taken to be the Countess's window. It was a face.

"Mathilde," whispered Hugues to me.

Keeping his gaze upon her, he held up the cross-bow for her notice; then the bolt, to which we had attached the slender cord. Next, before adjusting the bolt, he aimed the unbent bow at her window: this was to indicate what he was about to do. Then

he lowered the bow, and looked at her without further motion, awaiting some sign of understanding from her. She nodded her head emphatically, and drew it in.

Hugues fitted the string and the bolt, raised the bow, and stood motionless for I know not how many seconds; at last the string twanged; the bolt sang through the air. It did not fall, nor strike stone, and the cord remained suspended from above: the bolt had gone through the window.

"Good!" I whispered in elation; and truly Hugues deserved praise, for he had had to allow both for the wind and for the cord fastened to the bolt.

The cord was soon pulled upward. Our end of it was tied to the rope ladder, which Hugues unfolded as it continued to be drawn up by Mathilde. At the junction of cord and ladder was fixed the paper with instructions. Mathilde could not overlook this nor mistake its purpose. When the ladder was nearly all in the air, its movement ceased. We knew then that Mathilde had the other end of it. Presently the window became faintly alight.

"They have lighted a candle, to read the note," I whispered.

Hugues kept a careful hold upon our end of the ladder, to which there was fastened another cord,

shorter and stronger than the first. My note gave instructions to attach the ladder securely to a bed, or some other suitable object, which, if movable, should then be placed close to the window, but not so as to impede my entrance. It announced my intention of visiting the Countess for a purpose of supreme importance to us both. When the ladder was adjusted, a handkerchief should be waved up and down in the window.

“The Countess surely will not refuse to let me come and say what I have to,” I whispered, to reassure myself after we had waited some time.

“Surely not, Monsieur. She does not know yet what it is,” replied Hugues.

At that moment the handkerchief waved in the window.

Hugues drew the ladder taut and braced himself. I grasped one of the rounds, found a lower one with my foot, and began to mount. The ladder formed, of course, an incline over the moat. When I had ascended some way, Hugues, as we had agreed, allowed the ladder to swing gradually across the moat and hang against the tower, he retaining hold of the cord by which to draw the lower end back at the fit time. I now climbed perpendicularly, close to the tower. It was a laborious business, requiring great patience. Once I ran my eyes up along the

tall tower and saw the stars in the sky; once I looked down and saw them reflected in the moat: but as these diversions made my task appear the longer, and had a qualmish effect upon me, I thereafter studied only each immediate round of the ladder as I came to it. As I got higher, I felt the wind more; but it only refreshed me. Toward the end I had some misgiving lest the ladder should lie too tight against the bottom of the window for me to grasp the last rounds. But this fear proved groundless. Mathilde had placed a pillow at the outer edge of the sill, for the ladder to run over; and I had no sooner thrust my hand into the window than it was caught in a firm grasp and guided to the proper round. Another step brought my head above the sill: at the next, I had two arms inside the long, shaft-like opening; my body followed, as Mathilde's receded. I crawled through; lowered myself, hands and knees, to the couch beneath; leaped to the floor, and kneeling before the Countess, kissed her hand.

She was standing, and her dress was the same blue robe in which I had seen her in the same room two nights before. The candle was on a small table, which held also an illuminated book and an image of the Virgin, and above which a crucifix hung against the wall. Besides the bed at the window,

there were another bed, a trunk, a chair, and a three-legged stool.

The Countess's face was all anxiety and question.

"Thank God you are still safe!" said I.

"And you!" she replied. "Brigitte told us you had escaped. I had prayed your life might be saved. But now you put yourself in peril again. I had hoped you were far away. Oh, Monsieur, what is it brings you back to this house of danger?"

"My going has surely made it a house of greater danger to you. It is a marvel the Count has not already taken revenge upon you for my escape. I thank God I am here while you still live."

"My life is in God's hands. Was it to say this that you have risked yours again, Monsieur? Oh, your coming here but adds to my sorrow."

"Hear what sorrow you will cause, Madame, if you refuse to be saved while there is yet time. I ask you to consider others. Below, waiting for us, is Hugues, who has enabled me to come here to-night. You know how that good brave fellow loves Mathilde. And you know that if you die, Mathilde will share your fate, for the Count will wish to give his own story of your death."

"But Mathilde must not stay to share my fate. She must go away with you now, while there is opportunity."

“I will not stir from your side, Madame, — they will have to tear me away when they come to kill you,” said Mathilde, and then to me, “They have not sent Madame any food to-day. I think the plan is to starve us.”

“Horrible!” I said. “That, no doubt, is because of my escape. But who knows when the Count, in one of the rages caused by his fancies, may turn to some method still more fearful. Madame, how can you endure this? Why, it is to encourage his crime, when you might escape!”

“Monsieur, you cannot tempt me with sophistries. What God permits — ”

“Has not God permitted me to come here, with the means of escape? Avail yourself of them — see if God will not permit that.”

“We know that God permits sin, Monsieur, for his own good reasons. It is for us to see that we are not they to whom it is permitted.”

“But can you think it a sin to save yourself?”

“It is always a sin to break vows, Monsieur. And now — to go with you, of all men — would be doubly a sin.” She had lowered her voice, and she lowered her eyes, too, and drew slightly back from me.

“Then go with Hugues, Madame,” said I, my own voice softened almost to a whisper. “Only let

me follow at a little distance to see that you are safe. And when you are safe, finally and surely, I will go away, and we shall be as strangers."

Tears were in her eyes. But she answered:

"No, Monsieur; I should still be a truant wife — still a breaker of vows made to the Church and heaven."

"Then you would rather die, and have poor Mathilde die after you — Mathilde, who has no such scruples?"

"Mathilde must go away with you to-night. I command her — she will not disobey what may be the last orders I shall ever give her."

"Madame, I have never disobeyed yet, but I will disobey this time. I will not leave you." So said Mathilde, with quiet firmness.

"Ah, Mathilde, it is unkind, unfair! You will save yourself for Hugues's sake."

"I will save myself when you save yourself, Madame; not before."

The Countess sank upon the chair, and turning to the Virgin's image, said despairingly:

"Oh, Mother of heaven, save this child from her own fidelity!"

"It is not Mathilde alone that you doom," I now said, thinking it time to try my last means. "It is not only that you will darken the life of poor



Hugues. There is another who will not leave Lavardin if you will not: one who will stay near, sharing your danger; and who, if you die, will seek his own death in avenging you."

"Oh, no, Monsieur!" she entreated. "I was so glad to learn you had escaped. Do not rob me of that consolation. Do not stay at Lavardin. Live! — live and be happy, for my sake. So brave — so tender — the world needs you; and you must not die for me — I forbid you!"

"You will find me as immovable as Mathilde," said I.

She looked from one to the other of us, and put forth her hands pleadingly; then broke down into weeping.

"Oh, will you make my duty the harder?" she said. "God knows I would gladly die to save you."

"It is not dying that will save us. The only way is to save yourself."

"Monsieur, you shall not drive me to sin by your temptations! Heaven will save you both in spite of yourselves. That will be my reward for putting this sin from me."

"You persist in calling it a sin, Madame: very well. But is it not selfish to go free from sin at the expense of others? If one can save others by a sin of one's own, is it not nobler to take that sin

upon one's soul? Nay, is it not the greater sin to let others suffer, that one's own hands may be clean?"

"Oh, you tempt me with worldly reasoning, Monsieur. Kind mother of Christ," she said, fixing her eyes upon the image of Mary, "what shall I do? Be thou my guide — speak to my soul — tell me what to do!"

After a moment, the Countess again turned to me, still perplexed, agitated, unpersuaded.

"Madame," said I, "when one considers how soon the Count de Lavardin must surely suffer for crimes of which you know nothing, your death at his hands seems the more grievous a fate. Do you know that he is a traitor? — that his treason will soon be known to the King's ministers? If his jealousy had only waited a short while, or if my discovery had occurred a little earlier, his death would have spared you all this. But now, if you are not starved or slain before he is arrested, he will surely kill you when he finds himself about to be taken. — My God, I had not thought of that when I resolved to go to Paris at once! Oh, Madame, fly now while there is chance! I assure you that doom is hovering over the Count's head; if you stay here, I cannot go to Paris; but Hugues shall go with this paper in my stead."

“What is the paper, Monsieur? What do you mean by this talk of the Count and treason?” she asked in sheer wonder.

“It is a proof of the Count’s participation in the late conspiracy. I found it in the room where I was imprisoned. And come what may, I will see that it goes to Paris for the inspection of the Duke de Sully. And then there will be a short shrift for the Count de Lavardin, I promise you.”

“But in that case, it would be you that caused his death, Monsieur!” she exclaimed.

“The executioner would cause his death — and the law. I should be but the humble instrument of heaven to bring it to pass.”

“But you would be the instrument of my husband’s death, Monsieur! That must not be. You, of all men! No, no. Why, it would be an eternal barrier between us — in thought and kind feeling, I mean, — in the next world too. Oh, no; you must not use that paper, nor cause it to be used.”

“But, Madame, he is a traitor. What matters it whether I or another — it is only justice — my duty to the King.”

“But you do not understand. I should not dare even pray for you! And I must not let you denounce him — I must prevent your using that paper. I am his wife, Monsieur, — I must prevent. Other-

wise, I should be consenting to my husband's death!"

"He has no scruples about consenting to yours, Madame."

"The sin is on his part, then, not on mine. Come, Monsieur, you must let me destroy that paper." She advanced toward me.

"No, Madame; not I. Nay, I will use force to keep it, if need be! It is my one weapon, my one means of vengeance." I tore my wrist from her hand, and put the paper back into my inner pocket.

"Then, Monsieur, I have said my last to you. I must put you out of my thoughts, out of my prayers even. And if I find means, I must warn my husband."

"Listen, Madame. There is one condition upon which I will destroy this paper and keep silence."

She uttered a joyful cry. I knew that what she thought of was not her husband's fate, but the barrier she had mentioned.

"It is that you will escape with me at once," I said.

The joy passed out of her face; but she was silent.

"Consider," I went on. "Not merely your own life, not merely mine, not merely Mathilde's, and the happiness of Hugues: it is in your power to

save your husband's life also, and to save his soul from the crime of your murder, if there be any degree between act and intent. Is it not a sin and a folly to refuse? Think of the blood already shed by reason of this matter. Why should there be more?"

At last she wavered. I turned to Mathilde, to speak of the order in which we should descend the ladder.

At that instant I heard the key begin to grate in the lock.

"Some one is coming in!" whispered the Countess in alarm.

Instantly I pushed Mathilde upon the couch beneath the window, in a sitting posture, so that her body would conceal the end of the rope ladder. The next moment I had pulled the other bed a little way out from the wall, and was crouching behind it.

The door opened, and I heard the noise of men entering with heavy tread. Then the door closed. There was a sound of swift movement, then a scream from Mathilde and a terrified cry from the Countess, both voices being suddenly silenced at their height. I raised my head, and saw two powerful men in black masks, one of whom was grasping the Countess by the throat with his left hand while,

with his right assisted by his teeth, he was endeavouring to pass a looped cord around her neck. The other man had both hands about the neck of Mathilde, that he might sufficiently overpower her to apply a similar cord.

I leaped over the bed, and upon the man who was trying to strangle the Countess. Mad to save and avenge her, I sank my dagger into the back of his shoulder, and he fell without having seen who had attacked him. The murderer who was struggling with Mathilde immediately turned from her and drew sword to attack me, at the same time crying out, "Garoche, to the rescue!"

As I could not get the dagger out of the other man's shoulder joint in time, I drew my sword, and parried my new antagonist's thrust. The door now opened, and in came another man with drawn sword, not masked: he was, I suppose, the man on guard on the landing. Seeing how matters stood, he joined in the attack upon me. I backed into a corner, knocking over the chair of the Countess, who had run to Mathilde. The two women stood clasping each other, in terror. Suddenly my first assailant cried, "I leave him to you for a moment, Garoche," and ran and transferred the key from the outside to the inside of the door, which he then closed, so as to lock us all in. This



"I LEAPED OVER THE BED, AND UPON THE MAN WHO WAS TRYING TO STRANGLE THE COUNTESS."





was doubtless to prevent the exit of the Countess and Mathilde, the purpose being to keep the night's doings in that room as secret as possible even from the rest of the household. This man then pocketed the key, and, while Garoche continued to keep me occupied in my corner, ran to a side of the cell and began working with an iron wedge at a stone in the floor. He soon raised this, showing it to be a thin slab, and left exposed a dark hole. He then turned to the Countess, seized her around the waist, and tried to drag her toward the opening. His instructions had been, no doubt, to slay the women without bloodshed and drop the bodies through this secret aperture, but the unexpected turn of affairs had made him decide to precipitate the end and not strangle them first. Wild with horror at the prospect of their meeting so hideous a death, I sprang into the air, and ran my sword straight into the panting mouth of Garoche, so that the point came out at the back of his neck. He dropped, and I disengaged my weapon barely in time to check the onslaught of the other man, who, seeing Garoche's fate, had left the Countess and come at me again. I was out of breath after the violent thrusts I had made, and a mist now clouded my eyes. I know not how this last contest would have gone, had not Mathilde, recovering her self-command,

drawn the sword of the man who had fallen first, and, holding it with both hands, pushed it with all her strength into my adversary's back.

I wiped my weapons on the clothes of the slain murderers. The Countess fell on her knees and thanked heaven for our preservation. I then went to the opening made by the removal of the stone slab: peering down, I could see nothing. I took the key of the door from the pocket of its last holder, and dropped it through the hole, while the Countess and Mathilde leaned over me, listening. Some moments passed before we heard anything; then there came the sound of the key striking mud in the black depths far below. The secret shaft, then, led to the bottom of the tower.

The Countess shuddered, and whispered: "Come, let us not lose a moment."

I first lifted the masks, and recognized the murderers as fellows I had seen lounging in the courtyard. Then I gave directions for descending the ladder. I should have preferred being the last to leave the room but that I thought it necessary to support the Countess in her descent and Mathilde firmly refused to precede us. As the ladder might not hold the weight of three, Mathilde would see us to the ground, and then follow.

Two could not go out of the window at once,

so I backed through first, and waited when my feet were planted on the ladder, my breast being then against the edge of the window sill. Madame followed me. I guided her feet with one hand, and placed them on the ladder, having descended just sufficiently to make room for her. I then lowered myself another round, and she, holding on to a round in the window shaft with one hand, grasped the first round outside with the other, emerged entirely from the opening, and let me guide her foot a step lower. We then proceeded downward in this manner, I holding my head and body well back from the ladder so that her feet were usually on a level with my breast: thus if she showed any sign of weakness, I could throw an arm around her. I had first thought of having her clasp me around the neck, and so descending with her, but once upon the ladder, I saw no safe way for her to get behind me, or indeed to turn from facing the ladder. So we came down as I say, while I kept as well as I could between her and the possibility of falling. Frequently I asked in a whisper if all was well with her, and she answered yes.

When we were near the moat, I felt the ladder move from the wall and knew that Hugues was drawing it toward him. I warned the Countess of our change from a vertical to an inclined position,

and so we were swung across, and found ourselves above solid earth, on which we presently set foot.

“Best take Madame the Countess to the horses while I wait for Mathilde,” whispered Hugues to me, letting the ladder swing back; but Madame would not go till the maid was safe beside us. Mathilde, who had watched our descent, now drew her head in, and speedily we saw her feet emerge in its stead. She came down the ladder with ease and rapidity, such were her strength and self-possession. As soon as she touched the ground, Hugues swung back the ladder to stay, and took up his cross-bow.

“Come,” I whispered, and we turned our backs to that grim tower and hastened along the moat to the forest, passing on the way the high gable window of what had been my prison, the postern which I had such good reason to remember, and the oak from which I had seen Hugues display the handkerchief. Scarce a word was spoken till we came to the horses. I assisted the Countess to mount one of Hugues’s two, she making no difficulty about accommodating herself to a man’s saddle. By that time Hugues and Mathilde were on his second horse. I got upon my own, and we started. Our immediate purpose was to go to Hugues’s

house by the woods and lanes, fording the river below Montoire.

As we came out of the forest, beyond St. Outrille, the moon rose, and against the luminous Eastern sky we could see the dark tower we had left behind, — tower of blood and death, on which I hoped never to set eyes again.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE PARTING

WE hoped to be at Hugues's house before the Countess's flight should be discovered. Hugues and I discussed the chances as we rode. The Count would probably give his murderous agents ample time before going to see why they did not come to report the deed accomplished. He would then lose many minutes in breaking into the cell, and again in questioning the watchman on the tower — who could not have seen us in the woods and distant lanes — and considering what to do. The bloodhounds would doubtless be put upon the Countess's scent, but they would lose it at the place where we had taken horse. And then, Hugues thought, having tracked us into the forest, the Count would assume that we had continued our flight through it without change of direction, and he would push on to St. Arnoult, and along the road to Chateaurenault and Tours. This was, indeed, the most likely supposition. The Count would scarce expect to find us harboured in any

house in the neighbourhood, and he knew nothing of Hugues's attachment to Mathilde. Still I thought it well that the Countess should travel on as far as possible that night, and I asked her if she felt able to do so after stopping at Hugues's house for some food.

"Oh, yes," she answered compliantly.

I then broke to her that Hugues and I had provided a suit of boy's clothes which she might substitute for her present attire at his house, and so travel with less likelihood of attracting notice. To this she made no objection. She seemed, on leaving the chateau, to have resigned herself, almost languidly, to guidance. A kind of listlessness had come over her, which I attributed to exhaustion of spirit after all she had experienced.

I then told her that Hugues and I had decided it best that Mathilde should stay at his house for the present, keeping very close and having the hiding-place accessible, while I went on with the Countess. Hugues himself, who could entirely trust his old woman-servant and his boy, would see us as far as to our first resting-place.

To these proposals also she said "Very well," in a tone of half-indifference, but she cast a long, sad look at Mathilde, at mention of leaving her.

"And then, Madame," I went on, "as to our

journey after we leave Hugues's house. You have said you are without relations or fortune."

"Alas, yes. A provision for life-maintenance at the convent was all the fortune left me."

"In that case, I ask you, in the name of my father and mother, to honour them as their guest at La Tournoire. I can promise you a safe and private refuge there: I can promise you the friendship of my mother, the protection of my father, and his good offices with the King, if need be, to secure your rightful claims when the Count de Lavardin dies, as he must before many years."

"No, no, Monsieur, I shall have no claims. The Count married me without dowry, and if there be any other claims I surrender them. As for your generous offer, I cannot think of accepting it. You and I are soon to separate, and must not see each other again."

"But, Madame, I need not be at La Tournoire while you are there. I shall be out in the world, seeking honour and fortune."

"No, Monsieur, it is not to be thought of. My only refuge is the convent from which the Count took me."

"But is it safe to go there? Have you not said yourself that the Count would take measures to intercept you on the way?"



“But you and Hugues just now agreed that the Count would probably seek me on the road to Chateaurenault. That is in the opposite direction to the convent, which is beyond Chateaudun.”

“But the Count may seek toward the convent when he fails to find you in the other direction. Or he may take the precaution to send a party that way at once.”

“We shall be there before he or his emissaries can, shall we not? Once in the convent, I shall be safe. — And besides, Monsieur,” — her voice took on a faint touch of mock-laughing bitterness — “he will think I have run away with you for love, and for a different life than that of a convent. No; as matters are, it is scarce likely he will seek me in the neighbourhood of the convent.”

It was then determined that we should make for the convent, which, curiously, as it was beyond Chateaudun, happened to be upon my road to Paris. We now arrived at Hugues’s gate.

I dismounted only to help the Countess, and stayed in the road with the horses, while Hugues led Madame and Mathilde into the cottage. He took them thence into the mill, that they might eat, and the Countess change her dress, at the very entrance to the hiding-place. He then returned to me, the plan being that if we heard pursnit he and I were

to mount and ride on, thus leading our enemies away from the Countess, who with Mathilde should betake herself to the hiding-place till danger was past. With Hugues's knowledge of the byways and forest paths, we might be able to elude the hunt. During this wait we refreshed ourselves with wine and bread, which the old woman brought, and the boy fed the horses. In a short time the Countess reappeared, a graceful, slender youth in doublet, breeches, riding-boots of thin leather, cap, and gloves. Her undulating hair had been reduced by Mathilde, with a pair of shears, to a suitable shortness. Mathilde followed her, loth to part. We allowed little time for leave-taking with the poor girl, and were soon mounted and away, Hugues leading.

"I suggest, Madame," said I, as we proceeded along the road, which was soon shadowed from the moonlight by a narrow wood at our right, "that on this journey you pass as my young brother, going with me to Paris to the University. I will say that we have ridden ahead of our baggage and attendants,—which is literally true, for my baggage remains at Hugues's house and you have left Mathilde there."

"Very well, Monsieur," she replied.

"I should have some name to call you by upon

occasion," said I. "I will travel as Henri de Varion, for De Varion was my mother's name, and if you are willing to use it —"

"Certainly, Monsieur. As for a name to call me by upon occasion, there will be least falsehood in calling me Louis; for my real name is Louise."

"Thank you, Madame; and if you have to address me before people, do not forget to call me Henri."

"I shall not forget."

Her manner in this acquiescence was that of one who follows blindly where a trusted guide directs, but who takes little interest in the course or the outcome. A kind of forlorn indifference seemed to have stolen over her. But she listened to the particulars of residence and history with which I thought it wise to provide ourselves, and briefly assented to all. She then lapsed into silence, from which I could not draw her beyond the fewest words that would serve in politeness to answer my own speeches.

Meanwhile Hugues led us from the road and across the narrow wood, thence by a lane and a pasture field to the highway for Vendome and Paris. We pushed on steadily, passed through Les Roches, which was sound asleep, and, stopping only now and then to let our horses drink at some stream, at which times we listened and heard no sound upon

the road, we entered Vendome soon after daylight.

“Had we better stop here for a few hours?” said I, watching the Countess and perceiving with sorrow how tired and weak she looked.

“I think it well, Monsieur,” replied Hugues, his eyes dwelling where mine did.

“And yet,” I said, with a thought of the horror of her being taken, “it is so few leagues from Lavardin. In such a town, too, the Count’s men would visit all the inns. If we might go on to some village — some obscure inn. Could you keep up till then, Madame, do you think?”

“Oh, yes, — I think so.” But her pallor of face, her weakness of voice, belied her words.

“We should be more closely observed at some smaller place than here,” said Hugues. “Besides, we need not go to an inn here. There is a decent, close-mouthed woman I know, a butcher’s widow, who will lodge you if her rooms are not taken. It would be best to avoid the inns and go to her house at once. As like as not, if the Count did hunt this road, he would pass through the town without guessing you were at private lodgings.”

“It is the best thing we can do,” said I, with a blessing upon all widows of butchers. Hugues guided us to a little street behind the church of the Trinity, and soon brought the widow’s servant, and

then the widow herself, to the door. Her rooms were vacant, and we took two of them, in the top story, one overlooking the street, the other a back-yard wherein she agreed to let our horses stand. She promised moreover to say nothing of our presence there, and so, while Hugues led the horses through the narrow stone-paved passage, the widow showed us to our rooms. The front one being the larger and better, I left the Countess in possession of it as soon as we were alone, that she might rest until the woman brought the food I had ordered.

When breakfast was set out in the back room, and the Countess opened her door in answer to my knock, she looked so worn out and ill that I was alarmed. She had fallen asleep, she said, and my knock had wakened her. She ate little, and I could see that she was glad to go back and lie down again.

I had thought to resume our journey in the evening, and perhaps reach Chateaudun by a night's riding. But at evening the Countess seemed no more fit to travel than before. So I decided to stay at the widow's till Madame was fully recovered. Hugues would have remained with us another day, but I sent him back to his mill and Mathilde.

On the morrow the Countess was no better. I took the risk of going out, obtaining medicine at the apothecary's, and purchasing other necessary things

for both of us which we had not been able to provide before our flight. I was in dread lest we might have to resort to a physician and so make discovery that my young brother was a woman. Madame declared her illness was but exhaustion, and that she would soon be able to go on. But it was some days before I thought her strong enough to do so.

We had come into Vendome on a Wednesday: we left it on the following Monday morning. We encountered nothing troublesome on the road, and arrived at Chateaudun that Monday night. The Countess endured the journey fairly well; but her strange, dreamy listlessness had not left her.

At Chateaudun as at Vendome, we sought out lodgings in a by-street, and therein passed the night. We were now but a few hours' ride from the convent, by Madame's account of its location. Soon I should have to part from her, with the intention on her side not to see me again, and the promise on mine to respect that intention. To postpone this moment as long as possible, I found pretexts for delaying our departure in the morning; but as afternoon came on she insisted upon our setting out. I did so with a sorrowful heart, knowing it meant I must take my last leave of her that evening.

From our having passed nearly a week without any sign of pursuit, a feeling of security had arisen

in us. If the Count or his men had sought in this direction, passing through Vendome while we lay quiet in our back street, that search would probably be over by this time. But even if chase had not been made simultaneously by various parties on various roads, there had been time now for search in different directions one after another. Yet spies might remain posted at places along the roads for an indefinite period, especially near the convent. But as long as the risk was only that of encountering a man or two at once, I had confidence enough. In Vendome I had bought the Countess a light rapier to wear for the sake of appearance, of course not expecting her to use it. But though in case of attack I should have to fight alone, I felt that her presence would make me a match for two at least.

I tried to avoid falling in with people on the road, but a little way out from Chateaudun we came upon a country gentleman, of a well-fed and amiable sort, whose desire for companionship would let us neither pass ahead nor drop behind. He was followed by three stout servants, and expressed some concern at seeing two young gentlemen like us going that road without attendants.

“Though to be sure,” he added, “there seems to be less danger now; but you must have heard of the band of robbers that haunt the forests about Bonne-

val and further on. There has been little news of their doings lately, and some people think they may have gone to other parts. But who knows when they will suddenly make themselves heard of again, when least expected? — 'tis always the way."

He soon made us forget about dangers of the road, however, by his hearty talk; though, indeed, for all his good-fellowship I would rather have been alone with Madame in these last moments. About a league from Chateaudun, he arrived at his own small estate, rich in wines and orchards; he regretted that we would not stop, and recommended inns for us at Bonneval and the towns beyond.

We rode on, the Countess and I, in silence, my own heart too disturbed for speech, and she in that same dispirited state which had been hers from the beginning of our flight. Indeed now, when I was so soon to bid her farewell, she seemed more tired and melancholy, pale and drooping, than I had yet seen her. As I was sadly noticing this, we came to a place where a lesser road ran from the highway toward a long stretch of woods at the right. The Countess drew in her horse, and said, indicating the branch road:

"That is my way, Monsieur. I will say adieu here; but I will not even try to thank you. You



have risked your life for me many times over. I will pray for you — with my last breath.”

“But, Madame,” I exclaimed in astonishment, “we are not to say adieu here. I must see you to the convent.”

“The convent is not so far now. I know the way; and I wish to go there alone. You will respect my wish, I know: have you not had your way entirely so far on our journey? You cannot justly refuse me my will now.” She gave a wan little smile as if she knew the argument was not a fair one.

“But, Madame, — what can be your reason? — It is not safe. Surely you will not deny me the happiness of seeing my service fully accomplished, — of knowing that you are safe at the convent?”

“I am nearly there. I know the road, — it is a shorter way than the high roads, but little used. I shall meet no travellers. I fear no danger.”

“But consider, Madame. The danger may be at the very end of your journey. The Count may have spies within sight of the convent. You may fall into a trap at the last moment.”

“I can go first to the house of a woodman in the forest, whose wife was a servant of my mother’s. They are good, trustworthy people, and can see if all is safe before I approach the convent. If there is danger, I can send word by them to the Mother

Superior, who can find means to get me in secretly at night. You may deem your service accomplished, Monsieur. I must take my leave now."

"But it is so strange! What can be your reason? — what can be your objection to my going with you?"

"Ah, Monsieur, it may be unfair, but a woman is exempt from having to give reasons. It is my wish, — is not that enough? I am so deeply your debtor already, — let me be your debtor in this one thing more. — You have spent money for me: I have no means of repaying — nay, I will not mention it, — you have given me so much that is above all price, — your courage and skill. But enough of this — to speak of such things in my poor way is to cheapen them. Adieu, Monsieur! — adieu, Henri!"

She held out her hand, to which I lowered my lips without a word, for I could not speak.

"You will go your way when I go mine," she said with tenderness. "To Paris, perhaps?"

"To Paris — I suppose so," I said vaguely.

"This horse belongs to Hugues," she said, stroking the animal's neck. "I may find means to send it back to him. — Well, adieu! God be with you on your journey, Monsieur, — and through your life."

“Oh, Madame! — adieu, if you will have it so! adieu! — adieu, Louis!”

She smiled acquiescently at my use of the name by which I had had occasion to call her a few times at our lodging-places. Then, saying once more, “Adieu, Henri!” she turned her horse’s head and started down the by-road. With a heavy heart, I waited till she had disappeared in the woods. I had hoped she might look back, but she had not done so.

A movement of my rein, which I made without intention, was taken by my horse as a signal to go on, and the creature, resuming its original direction, kept to the highway and plodded along toward Bonneval and Paris.

Never in all my life, before or since, have I felt so alone. What was there for me to do now? All my care, all my heart, was with the solitary figure on horseback somewhere yonder in the forest. Had life any object for me elsewhere?

Yes, faith! — and I laughed ironically as it came back to my thoughts — I might now go on to Paris and cut off the moustaches of Brignan de Brignan!

## CHAPTER XIV.

### IN THE FOREST

BUT I had not yet come in sight of Bonneval, when fearful misgivings began to assail me as to what might befall the Countess. I awoke to a full sense of my folly in yielding to her wish. Her own apparent confidence of safety had made me, for a time, feel there must be indeed small danger. I had too weakly given way to her right of command in the case. I had been too easily checked by respect for what private reason she might have for wishing to go on without company. I had played the boy and the fool, and if ever there had been a time when I ought to have used a man's authority, laughing down her protests, it had been when she rode away alone toward the forest.

I turned my horse about, resolved to undo my error as far as I might, — to go back and take the road she had taken, and not rest till I knew she was safe in the convent.

My fears increased as I went. What the country gentleman had said about robbers came back to my mind. I arrived at the junction of the roads, and galloped to the woods. Once among the trees, I had to proceed slowly, for the road dwindled to a mere path, so grown with grass as to show how little it was ordinarily resorted to. But there were horseshoe prints which, though at first I took them to be only those of the Countess's horse, soon appeared so numerous together that I saw there must have been other travellers there recently. I perceived, too, that the wood was of great depth and extent, and not the narrow strip I had supposed. It was, in fact, part of a large forest. I became the more disquieted, till at last, as the light of day began to die out of the woods, I was oppressed with a belief as strong as certainty, that some great peril had already fallen upon her I loved.

I came into a little green glade, around which I glanced. My heart seemed to faint within me, for there, by a small stream that trickled through the glade, was a horse grazing, — a horse with bridle and saddle but no rider. The rein hung upon the grass, the saddle was pulled awry, and the horse was that of the Countess.

I looked wildly in every direction, but she was nowhere to be seen. The horse raised his head,

and whinnied in recognition of me and my animal, then went on cropping the grass. I rode over to him, as if by questioning the dumb beast I might learn where his mistress was. There was no sign of any sort by which I might be guided in seeking her.

I called aloud, "Madame! madame!" But there was only the faint breeze of evening among the treetops for answer.

But the horse could not have wandered far. Whatever had occurred, there must be traces near. My best course was to search the forest close at hand: any one of those darkening aisles stretching on every side, like corridors leading to caves of gloom, might contain the secret: each dusky avenue, its ground hidden by tangled forest growth, seemed to bid me come and discover. I dismounted, knowing I could trust my horse to stay in the glade, and, crossing the stream, explored the further portion of the path.

I came to a place where the underbrush at the side of the path was somewhat beaten aside. I thought I could distinguish where some person or animal had gone from this place, tramping a sort of barely traceable furrow through the tangle. I followed this course: it led me back to the glade. Doubtless the horse had made it.

I was about to go back along the path, when I noticed a similar trodden-down appearance along one side of the stream where it left the glade. Hoping little, I examined this. It brought me, after a few yards, to a clear piece of turf swelling up around the roots of an oak. And lying there, on the grassy incline, with her head at the foot of the oak, was the Countess, as silent and motionless as death, with blood upon her forehead.

My own heart leaping, I knelt to discover if hers still moved. Her body stirred at my touch. I dipped my handkerchief in the stream, and gently washed away the blood, but revealed no cut until I examined beneath the hair, when I found a long shallow gash. I hastily cleansed her hair of the blood as well as I could, with such care as not to cause the wound to flow anew. All the time I was doing this, my joy at finding her alive and free was such that I could have sobbed aloud.

She awoke and recognized me, first smiling faintly, but in a moment parting her lips in sorrowful surprise, and then, after glancing round, giving a sigh of profound weariness.

“Am I then still alive?” she murmured.

“Yes, Madame; — I thank God from my heart.”

“It is His will,” she said. “I had hoped — I had thought my life in this world was ended.”

“Oh, do not say that. What can you mean?”

“When they surrounded me — the men who sprang up at the sides of the path — I thought, ‘Yes, these are the robbers the gentleman spoke of, — God has been kind and has sent them to waylay me: if I resist, I may be killed, and surely I have a right to resist.’ So I drew my sword, and made a thrust at the nearest. He struck me with some weapon — I did not even notice what it was, I was so glad when it came swiftly — when I felt I could not save myself. The blow was like a kiss — the kiss of death, welcoming me out of this life of sad and bitter prospects.”

“Oh, Madame, how can you talk in this way, when you are still young and beautiful, and there are those who love you?”

“You do not know all, Henri. What is there for me in life? I am weak to complain — weak to long for death — sinful, perhaps, to put myself in its way, but surely Heaven will pardon that sin, — weak, yes; but, alas, I cannot help it, — women are weak, are they not? What is before me, then? I am one without a place in the world — without relations, without fortune. If I were a man, I might seek my fortune — there are the wars, there are many kinds of honourable service. But what



is there for a woman, a wife who has run away from her husband?"

"But Madame, the convent, — you have a right to be maintained there. You can at least live there, till time annuls the Count's claims upon you. And then who knows what the future may bring?"

"The convent — I have told you I should be safe there, and so no doubt I should if I took the veil — "

"Nay, Madame, not that, save as a last resort!"

"Alas, I may not though I would. Do you think I should hesitate if I were free? How gladly I would bury myself from this world, give myself at once to Heaven! But that resource — that happiness — is forbidden me. My mother, as she neared death, saw no security for me but as a life-guest at a convent. Our small fortune barely sufficed to make the provision. But she did not wish me to become a nun, and as she feared the influence of the convent might lead that way, she put me under a promise never to take the veil. So I am without the one natural resource of a woman in my position."

"But do you mean that you will not be safe at the convent merely as a guest?"

"The Count may claim the fulfilment of his rights as a husband. He may use force to take me away.

The Mother Superior cannot withhold me from him; and indeed I fear she would be little inclined to if she could, unless I consented to take the veil. Before the possibility of my marriage came up, she was always urging me to apply for a remission of the vow to my mother, so that I might become a nun. But that I would never do."

"But, Madame, knowing all this, how could you select the convent as your refuge, and let me bring you so far toward it?"

"Ah, Monsieur, what place in the world was there for me? And yet I had to go somewhere, that your life might be saved, and Mathilde's, and the happiness of poor Hugues. There was no other way to draw you far from that chateau of murder, no other way to detach Mathilde from one who could bring her nothing but calamity. And to-day, when I left you, I thought all this was accomplished, and I was free to go my way in search of death."

"Oh, Madame, if I had known what was in your mind! Then you did not mean to go to the convent?"

"I meant to go toward the convent. It is further away than I allowed you to suppose. I felt — I know not why — that death would meet me on the way. I felt in my heart a promise that God would do me that kindness. At first I had no idea

of what form my deliverer would take. Perhaps, I thought, I might be permitted to lose my way in the forest and die of hunger, or perhaps I might encounter some wild beast, or a storm might arise and cause me to be struck by lightning or a falling bough, or I might be so chilled and weakened by rain that I must needs lie down and die. I knew not what shape, — all I felt was, that it waited for me in the forest. And when the gentleman spoke of robbers, I rejoiced, for it seemed to confirm my belief.”

“And that is why you would not let me come with you?”

“Yes, certainly; that you might not be present to drive death away from me, or meet it with me. I hoped you would go on to Paris, thinking me safe, and that you would soon forget me. You see how I desire you to live, and how you can please me only by doing so.”

“And so, when you were at last in the forest — ?”

“At last in the forest, yes — I knew not how long I should have to ride, but I made no haste, — sooner or later it would come, I thought. The birds hopping about on the branches seemed to be saying to one another, ‘See this lady who has come to meet death.’ I crossed a glade, and something

seemed to whisper to my heart, 'Yonder it lies waiting, yonder in the shades beyond that little stream.' So I went on, and true enough, before I had gone far, five or six rough men sprang out from the bushes. Two caught my reins, and one raised a weapon of some kind and bade me deliver up my purse. I had no purse to deliver, and I feared they might let me go as not worth their trouble. Then I thought they might hold me for ransom, or rob me of my clothes, and discover I was a woman. Surely I was justified in resisting such a fate; so I drew the sword you gave me, and made a pass at the man with the weapon. He struck instantly, before I could turn my head aside, and I had time only for a flash of joy that God had indeed granted me deliverance. I scarce felt the blow, and then all went out in darkness. I knew nothing after. How did I come here? This is not the place where I met the robbers."

"It is very strange," said I. "This is where I found you, only a little while before you came to life. I had searched the path, but I saw no robbers. They did not take your horse, — I found it in the glade yonder, where I have left mine with it. That must be the glade you crossed before they appeared."

“But how came you to be here? Ah, did you disregard my wish and follow me?”

“Not at first. No; I went on toward Paris as you bade me. But after awhile I too had a feeling of danger befalling you in this forest. It was so strong that I could not force myself to go on. So I rode back, hoping to come in sight of you and follow at a distance. I could not do otherwise.”

“Ah, Henri, perhaps it is to you I owe the ill service of bringing me back to life. Who knows? — I might have passed quietly away to death here had you not come and revived the feeble spark left in me. I must have been unconscious a long time.”

“Yes; thank God I arrived no later than I did. But why should the robbers have brought you here? They have not even taken any of your clothes. See, here is your sword, replaced in its scabbard; even your cap is here, beside your head — look where the villain’s weapon cut through, — it must have been a sort of halberd. Why should they have brought you here? Do they mean to return, I wonder?”

I rose and looked around, peering through the dusky spaces between the trunks of the trees, and straining my ears. Suddenly, amidst the chatter

of the birds returning to their places for the night, I made out a sound of distant hoof-beats.

“Horsemen!” I said. “But these robbers were on foot, were they not?”

“Yes; I did not see any horses about.”

“Who can these be? There must be several!”

They were apparently coming from that part of the forest toward which the Countess had been riding. On account of the brushwood I could not see them yet.

“Well,” said I, “we had best keep as quiet as possible till they pass. But they will see our horses in crossing the glade. No, that must not be. Wait.”

I ran back to the glade, and finding the horses close together, caught them both, led them down the bed of the stream to where the Countess was, and made them lie among the underwood, trusting to good fortune that they would be quiet while the others were passing.

Soon I could see, above the underbrush that extended to the path beyond the brook, a procession of steel head-pieces, bearded faces, breastplates over leather jerkins, and horses' heads. There were six or seven men in all, one after another. I lay close to the earth and heard them cross the stream. And then, to my astonishment, they came directly along

the stream by the way I had first come; I rose to my feet just in time to face the leader as he stopped his horse within a yard of me.

He gazed over the neck of his steed at me, and the Countess, and our two animals. He was a tall, well-made, handsome man, seasoned but still young, with a bronzed, fearless face.

“Good evening,” said he, in a rich, manly voice. “So the youngster has come to his senses, — and found a friend, it appears.”

“I don’t exactly understand you, Monsieur,” said I.

“You are not to blame for that,” he replied good-humouredly. “It is true I met your young friend awhile ago, but as he was more dead than alive at that time, he couldn’t have told you much. How is it with him now?”

“I am not much hurt, Monsieur,” replied the Countess for herself.

“I scarce knew how I should find you when I returned,” said the newcomer.

“Then you saw him here before, Monsieur?” said I.

“Yes ; it was I who brought him here, — but, faith! he was in no condition to see what was going on. We were searching this forest on the King’s business, when I heard something a little

ahead, which made me gallop forward, and there I saw half- a-dozen ruffians around a horse, and one of them dragging this youth from the saddle. I shouted to my comrades and charged at the robbers. They dropped the lad, and made off along the path. I stopped to see to the young gentleman, and ordered my companions to pursue the rascals. The youngster, let me tell you, seemed quite done for. He had been struck, as you see, evidently just before he was pulled from the horse."

"Yes, Monsieur," said the Countess; "and I knew nothing after the blow."

"So it appeared," replied the horseman. "I saw that water was needed, and remembering this stream we had crossed, I carried you to this place and did what I could for you. But I had to go and recall my men, — I feared they might be led too far, or separated by the robbers running in different directions. That explains my leaving you alone. We have a piece of work in hand, of some importance, and dare not risk anything for the sake of catching those knaves."

"I suppose they are part of the band that haunts this forest," said I.

"No doubt. But this forest is at present the haunt of larger game. Those scoundrels escaped us this time — they were favoured by the dusk and



the undergrowth. I was longer in catching up with my comrades than I had thought. But I see all has gone well with that young gentleman in the meantime."

"Yes, Monsieur. I, his brother, ought never to have allowed him to go on alone. But I was riding after, expecting to overtake him, when I came upon his horse; I supposed he must be near, and I was fortunate enough to seek in the right place. He shall not leave me again; and for us both I thank you more than my tongue can ever express."

"Pouf! — I did nothing. The question is, what now? My comrades and I have affairs to look after in the forest. We shall continue on the path where your brother met his accident, till we come to a certain forester's house where we may pass the night. Your direction appears to be the same, and you will be safe with us."

"Again I thank you, Monsieur," I said, "but we shall give up our journey through the forest. As soon as my brother feels able to ride, we shall go back to the highway and pass the night at some inn. I think we shall be safe enough now that you have frightened the robbers from this part of the forest."

The horseman eyed me shrewdly, and glanced at the Countess. It occurred to me then that he

had known her sex from the first, and that he now trusted me with wisdom enough to judge best what I ought to do. So he delicately refrained from pressing us, as he had all along from trying to learn our secret. For a moment he silently twirled his moustaches; then he said:

“In that case, I have but to wish you good-night, and good fortune. I think you will be safe enough between here and the highway. Please do not mention that you have seen any of the King’s guard hereabouts, — though I fear that news is already on the wing.”

“What, Monsieur? — are you, then, of the King’s guard?”

“We have the honour to be so.”

“But I thought their uniform — ”

“Faith, we are in our working clothes,” said he, with a laugh. The next moment he waved us adieu, turned his horse about, and, his companions also turning at his order, followed them out of our sight.

“A very charming gentleman,” said I, as the sound of their horses diminished in our ears.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE TOWER OF MORLON

THE Countess still lay on the grassy couch beneath the oak. She seemed to have lost all will as to her course of action.

“I think best not to go with those guards,” I explained after a moment. “For why should we travel their way without any destination? There is nothing for us now in that direction. After what you have told me, I dare not let you go to the convent.”

“There is no place for me,” she said listlessly. “Death has disappointed me, and left me in the lurch. I think this place is as good as another.”

She closed her eyes for some moments, as if she would lie there till death came, after all.

“No,” said I; “you must not stay here. Night is coming on: the chill and the dews will be harmful to you. Besides, there are clouds already blotting out some of the stars, and the wind is rising

and may bring more. If there is rain, it may be heavy, after so many days of fine weather. It will soon be too dark to follow the path. We must be getting on."

"I am weak from this blow," she said, — rather as if for a pretext against moving, I thought. "I am not sure I could keep my saddle."

"I can carry you as I ride, if need be, and let your horse follow. Come, Madame, let us see if you can rise. If not, I will take you in my arms to the glade, where it will be easier to mount."

I stooped to support her, but she did not stir.

"But where am I to go?" she said. "Of what use to travel aimlessly from place to place? As you say, why should we ride on toward the convent without a destination? But where else have I a destination?"

"Listen, Madame. Is it not probable that after some weeks, or months, the Count, still disappointed of your taking refuge at the convent, will give up hope or expectation of finding you there? Will he not then withdraw his attention from the convent?"

"I suppose so."

"And can we not, if we take time, find means to learn when that becomes the case? Can we not, by careful investigation, make sure whether he is

still watching the convent or whether he has an informant there? Can we not enter into communication with the Mother Superior, and find out what her attitude is toward you, — whether, if you returned, your residence there would be safe and kept secret? Surely she would not betray you.”

“Oh, no; whatever attitude she took, she would tell me the truth.”

“Then it is only necessary to wait a few months and take those measures, without letting your own whereabouts be known even to the Mother Superior.”

“But meanwhile would you have me continue doing as I have done since my flight, — passing as something I am not, receiving the protection — living on the very bounty — of the one person in all the world from whom I should accept nothing? Why, Monsieur, if it were known — if no more than the mere truth were told — would it not seem to justify the Count de Lavardin?”

“I do not ask you to do as you have done. For only two or three days you need pass as a boy. You may then not only resume the habit of a woman, but enjoy the company and friendship of a woman as saintly as yourself. Your presence in her house must be a secret till affairs mend, but you may be sure that if her friendship for you were known,

it would be a sufficient answer to anything your husband or the world might say against you."

"It is of your mother that you speak. But I told you before, it is not from you that I dare accept so much."

"It will be from my mother, who will believe me when I tell her the truth, and who will take you as her guest and friend for your own sake. As for me, my affairs in Paris will keep me from La Tournoire while you are there:—for consider, what I propose now is not what you refused that night we fled from Lavardin. I spoke then of your making La Tournoire your refuge for an indefinite time,—the rest of your life, if need be:—I speak now of your staying there only till your safe residence at the convent can be assured,—only a few months, or weeks."

Though I had begun and ended by speaking of the convent, I did so merely with the object of inducing her to go to La Tournoire. Once there, she would be under the guidance and persuasion of my mother, who could influence her to remain till the Count's death removed all danger.

"You must not refuse, Madame," I went on. "God has shown that He does not desire your death, and it must be His will that you should accept this plan, so clear and simple. Speak, Madame!"

“I know not. — I have no strength, no will, to oppose further. Let it be as you think best.” The last vestige of her power of objection, of resolving or thinking for herself, seemed to pass out in a tired sigh.

“Good!” I cried. “Then we have but to regain the road and find some inn for the night. To-morrow we shall ride back to Chateaudun, or perhaps on to Bonneval, and then make for La Tournoire by Le Mans and Sablé, which is to give a wide berth to Montoire and the road we have come by. Do you think you can rise, Madame? — Nay, wait till I lead the horses out.”

I took the horses to the glade, then returned and found the Countess already on her feet, though with her hand against the tree, as she was somewhat dizzy. She walked with my assistance, and I helped her to her saddle, — she now thought herself able to ride without support. I mounted my own horse, grasped the halter of the other, and took the path for the highway.

“We are none too soon,” said I, as we left the glade. “How dark the path is even now: I hope we shall be able to keep it.”

Darkness came on more quickly than usual, because of the swift overclouding of the sky. Very soon I could not see two paces before me. Then

blackness settled down upon us. My horse still went on, but slowly and uncertainly, with many a halt to make sure of footing and a free way. When I glanced back, I could not see the Countess, but I held the tighter to the halter of her horse and frequently asked if all was well. Her reply was, "Yes, Monsieur," in a faint, tired voice. I felt about with my whip for the trees at the side of the path, and thus was able to guide the horse when its own confidence faltered.

Instead of cooling, the air became close. Suddenly the forest was lighted up by a pale flash which, lasting but a moment, was followed after a time by a distant rumble of thunder.

"It is far away, Madame," said I. "It may not come in this direction, or we may be safely housed before it does."

"I am not afraid."

However, lest rain might fall suddenly, I stopped the horses, unrolled from behind my saddle a cloak which I had bought in Vendome, and put it around the Countess. We then proceeded as best we could. Slowly as we had gone, I began to think it time we should emerge from the forest; but another flash of lightning showed apparently endless vistas of wood on every side. We went on for another half hour or so, during which the distant thunder



continued at intervals; and then, finding ourselves as deep in the forest as ever, I perceived that we must have strayed from our right path. I stopped and told the Countess.

“It must be so,” she said.

“I noticed no cross-path when I rode into the forest this afternoon. Yet a path might join at such an angle that, looking straight ahead, I should not have seen it. Yes, that is undoubtedly the case, if we are in a path at all. Perhaps we are following the bed of a dried-up stream.”

“Do you wish to turn back, then?”

“We might only lose ourselves. And yet that is what must happen if we go ahead. Let us wait for a flash of lightning.”

One came presently, while my eyes were turned ready in what I thought the direction from which we had come. But there seemed to be no opening at all in that direction. Then, in the blacker darkness that ensued, I remembered that I had turned my horse slightly while talking of the matter. I could not now tell exactly which direction we had come from. It occurred to me that perhaps for some time we had wandered about in no path at all, going where trees and underbrush left space clear enough to be mistaken.

I confessed that I knew not which way to go, even to find the original path.

“Is it best to ride on at random, in hope of coming upon something, or to stay where we are till daylight?” I asked.

The Countess had no will upon the matter. But the question was decided for me by a heavy down-pour of rain, which came in a rush without warning. It was evident that the foliage over us was not thick. So I shouted to the Countess that we would go on till we found trees that gave more protection. I urged my horse to move, letting him choose his own course, and he obediently toiled forward, I exerting myself to keep the other horse close, and also feeling the way with my whip.

As swift as the oncoming of the rain, was the increase of the lightning, both in frequency and intensity. The fall of the rain seemed loud beyond measure, but it was drowned out of all hearing when the thunder rolled and reverberated across the sky. In the bright bursts of lightning, the trees, seen through falling rain, seemed like companions suffering with us the chastisement of the heavens; but in the darkness that intervened between the flashes, the forest and all the world seemed to have died out of existence, leaving nothing but the pelting waters and the din of the storm.

At last we came, not to a region where the boughs were less penetrable, but to an open space where the downpour had us entirely at its mercy. I thought at first we had got out of the forest, or into the glade we had left; but a brilliant flash showed us it was another small clearing, which rose slightly toward the thick woods on its further side. And the same lightning revealed, against the background of trees, a solitary tower, old and half-ruined, slender and of no great height. A doorway on a level with the ground stood half open.

“Did you see that?” I cried, when the lightning had passed. “There is shelter.”

“It must be the tower of Morlon,” said the Countess.

“And who lives there?”

“Nobody, — at least it was said to be empty when I used to hear of it. It is all that is left of a house that was destroyed in the civil wars. Hunting parties sometimes resort to it, and the peasants make use of it when passing this way. — Yes, we have come far out of our road, if that is really the tower of Morlon.”

“Then it is every man’s house. The door is open.”

“It is an abandoned place, and people would take no care how they left the door.”

“Let us go in, then. There can be nobody there, or the door would be closed against this storm.”

I rode toward the spot where I supposed the tower was, and, rectifying my course by the next flash, I presently felt the stone wall with my whip. I dismounted, found the entrance, pushed the door wide, and saw by the lightning a low-ceiled interior, which was empty. I led the horses in, helped the Countess from the saddle, and removed her cloak, which, though itself drenched, had kept her clothes comparatively dry.

My first thought was of a place where the Countess might recline. But, as I found by groping about and by the frequent lightning, there was nothing except the floor, which, originally paved with stone, was now covered with dried mud from the boots of many who had resorted to the place before ourselves. There were no steps leading to the upper stories of the tower: the part we were in was, indeed, but a sort of basement. It occupied the full ground space of the tower, with the rough stone as its only shell, and had no window nor any discoverable opening place in the low ceiling.

Thinking there might be an external staircase to the story above us, I went out and felt my way around the tower, but found none. The entrance to the main or upper part of the tower from the buildings that once adjoined must have been to the story above, from a floor on the same level. I thought of seeking the opening and climbing in from the back of my horse, but I reflected that the upper stories also would doubtless be denuded, while they could offer no better shelter from the rain. So I was content with taking the saddles from the horses, and placing them together upside down in such a way that they constituted a dry reclining place for the Countess.

There was no dry wood to be had from the forest, and no fuel of any kind in our place of refuge: so I could not make a fire. While the Countess sat in silence, I paced the floor until I succumbed to fatigue. By that time, much of the water had dripped from my clothes, and I was able to sit on the carpet of earth with some comfort. I leaned my back against the wall, to wait till the storm and the night should pass.

The horses had lain down, and the Countess, as I perceived by her deep breathing and her not answering me, was asleep. The thunder and lightning were less near and less powerful, but the

rain still fell, now decreasingly and now with suddenly regathered force. At last I too slept.

I awoke during the night, and changed from a sitting to a lying position. When I next opened my eyes, the light of dawn was streaming in at the door. The storm had ceased, birds were twittering outside. I was aching and hungry. The Countess's face, as she slept, betokened weakness and pain. I went and adjusted a saddle-flap that had got awry under her. As I did so, she awoke.

"I am so tired," she said in a slow, small voice, like that of a weary child.

"You are faint for want of food," said I. "You have eaten nothing since noon yesterday, and very little then."

Thinking I wished to hurry our departure in search of breakfast, she shook her head and murmured weakly :

"I am not able to go on just now. I assure you, I cannot even stand. All strength seems to have gone out of me." As if to illustrate, she raised her hand a few inches : it trembled a moment, then fell as if powerless.

It was plain that she was, whether from fatigue and privation alone, or from illness also, in a helpless state. It would be cruelty and folly to put her on horseback. And without at least the re-

freshment of food and wine, how was her condition to be improved so that she might leave this place?

After some thought and talk, I said:

"The only thing is for me to go and get you food and wine, while you stay here. But, alas, what danger you may be in while I am gone! If anybody should come here and find you!"

"Nobody may come. Surely there are many days when this place is left deserted."

"But if somebody *should* come?"

"All people are not cruel and wicked. It might be a person who is kind and good."

"But the robbers?"

"Why should they come? There is nothing for them here. If they came it would be by chance: against that, we can trust in God."

"Perhaps intruders can be bolted out," said I, going to examine the door. It was of thick oak, heavily studded with nails, and two of its three hinges still held firmly. But there was no bolt, nor any means of barring.

"Nothing but a lock," I said, "and no key for that." It only aggravated my feeling of mockery to discover that both parts of the lock were still strong. In my petulance I flung the door back against the wall.

As one sometimes gives the improbable a trial, from mere impulse of experiment, I took from my pocket the two keys I had brought from Lavardin. I tried first that of the room in which I had been imprisoned: it was too small, and of no avail. I then inserted the key of the postern. To my surprise, it fit. I turned it partly around; it met resistance: I used all my power of wrist; the lock, which had stuck because it was rusted and long unused, yielded to the strength I summoned.

“Thank God!” I cried. “It seems like the work of providence, that I kept the postern key.”

I now reversed and withdrew the key, and applied it to the lock from the inside of the door, which I had meanwhile closed. But alas!—no force of mine could move the lock from that side, though I tried again and again.

I went outside and easily enough locked the door from there. I then renewed my endeavours from the inside, but with failure.

“Alas!” said I, turning to the Countess; “if I cannot lock the door from within, how much less will you be able to do so.”

“But you can lock it from without,” she answered, taking trouble to secure my peace of mind. “Why not lock me in? It will be the same thing.



In either case I should not go out during your absence."

"That is true," I said. "I will make haste. If the door is locked against intruders, what matters it which of us has the key? I will guard it as my life, — nay, that too I will guard as never before, for yours will depend upon it."

I then questioned the Countess as to what part of the forest we were in, but her knowledge of the location of the tower, with regard to roads or paths, was vague.

I decided to take both horses with me, lest one, being heard or seen, in or about the tower, might excite the curiosity of some chance passer through the forest. But I left the saddles with the Countess. Anxious to lose no more time, I knelt and kissed her hand, receiving a faint smile in acknowledgment of my care; led out the horses, locked the door, pocketed the key, mounted, and was off. I went haunted by the sweet, sorrowful eyes of the Countess as they had followed me to the door.

With the sun to guide me, I rode Westward, for in that direction must be the highway we had left the day before. By keeping a straight course, and taking note of my place of emergence from the forest, I should be able to find my way back to the tower. The leaves overhead were nowhere so thick

but that splashes of sunshine fell upon the earth and undergrowth, and, by keeping the shadow of my horse and myself ever straight in front, I maintained our direction. But besides this I frequently notched the bark of some tree, always on its South side, with my dagger. Having this to do, and the second horse to lead, and the underbush being often difficult, my progress was slower than suited my impatience. But in about an hour and a half from starting, I came out of the forest upon the bank of the Loir, which is so insignificant a stream thereabouts that I may not have mentioned fording it upon entering the woods on the previous day. I let the horses drink, and then rode through, and across a meadow to the highway. I turned to the right, and arrived, sooner than I had expected, at the gate of a town, which proved to be Bonneval. I stopped at the inn across from the church, saw to the feeding of my horses, and then went into the kitchen. I ordered a supply of young fowl, bread, wine, milk in bottles, and other things; and bargained with the innkeeper for a pair of pliable baskets and a strap by which they might be slung across my horse like panniers. While I waited for the chickens to roast, I used the time in reviving my own energies with wine, eggs, and cold ham, which were to be had immediately.

Three or four people came or went while I was eating, and each time anybody crossed the threshold of the door, I glanced to see what sort of person it was. This watchfulness had become habitual to me of late. But as I was about finishing my meal, with my eyes upon my plate, I had an impression that somebody was standing near and gazing at me. As I had not observed any one to come so close, I looked up with a start. And there stood Monsieur de Pepicot, his nose as long as ever, his eyes as meek as when they had first regarded me at Lavardin.

"My faith!" I exclaimed. "You rise like a spirit. I neither saw nor heard you enter."

"I am a quiet man," he replied with a faint smile, sitting down opposite me.

"You are the very ghost of silence itself," said I. "What do you wear on the soles of your boots?"

Again he smiled faintly, but he left my question unanswered. "So you managed to keep out of trouble at that place where I last saw you?" said he.

"If I did not keep out of it, at least I got out of it."

"You are a clever young man, — or a lucky one. I was a little disturbed in mind at leaving you as I did. But — business called me. I knew that if you could manage to keep a whole body for ten days

or so, even if that amiable Count did see fit to cage you up, you would be set free in the end."

"Set free? By the Count, do you mean?"

"Not at all. By those who would visit the Count; by those who have — But stay, — have you not just come from Lavardin?"

"No, indeed. I left that hospitable house more than a week ago. I set myself free."

"Oh, is that the case? I ask your pardon. When I saw you here, I naturally supposed your liberation was a result of what has just occurred. I haven't yet learned all particulars of the event."

"What event? I don't understand you."

"Then you don't know what has been going on at Lavardin recently?"

"Not I."

"Oh, indeed? Well, it will be known to all the world very soon. The Count, it seems, was suspected of some hand in the late intrigue with Spain —"

"Ah!"

"Why do you say 'Ah!'?"

"Nothing. I always thought there might be something wrong with the Count's politics."

"Well, so they thought in Paris. And having made sure —"

"How did they make sure?"

"Oh, by the discovery of certain documents, no

doubt," said Monsieur de Pepicot, with a notable unconsciousness. "It is the usual way, is it not?"

"Aha! I begin to see now. You overdo the innocence, my friend. I begin to guess what you were doing at Lavardin —"

"Monsieur, I know not what you mean."

"I begin to guess why you wanted to get into the chateau, — what you were wandering about the house with a lantern for, — why you took your leave so unexpectedly, — and how you knew that in ten days I should be set free."

"Nay, Monsieur, I cannot follow you in your perceptions. I know only that on Monday evening a party of the King's guard appeared before the Chateau de Lavardin —"

"Having been sent from Paris soon after you had arrived there with the documents you found in the chateau."

"Please do not interrupt with your baseless conjectures, Monsieur. As I said, the guards arrived at Lavardin just as, by great good fortune, the Count himself was returning from some journey or excursion he had been on. Thus they met him outside his walls: had it been otherwise they would doubtless have had infinite trouble, for, as we know, the chateau has been for some time fully prepared

for a siege, even to being garrisoned by the company of Captain Ferragant."

"What! then those fellows who thronged the courtyard —"

"Were a part of Captain Ferragant's famous company, — only a part, as I should have said at first, unless he has reduced its numbers. Well, instead of having the difficulty of besieging the chateau, the guards had the luck to meet the Count in the road, when he had only a few followers with him. And so they made short work."

"They succeeded in arresting him?"

"Not exactly that. He chose to resist, no doubt thinking he would soon be reinforced from the chateau by the Captain and garrison. And in the fight, the Count was killed, — stuck through the lungs by the sword of a guard who had to defend himself from the Count's own attack."

"My God! the Count killed! — dead! — out of the way!" For a moment I entirely yielded to the force of this news, which to my ears meant so much.

"Yes. You don't seem grieved. — Yes: he will never annoy people again. The Captain, though, seeing from the chateau how matters had gone, came out with his men on horseback, — not to avenge the Count, but to ride off as fast as possible

in the other direction. So the King's guardsmen had no trouble in getting into the chateau. A party of them, I believe, set off in pursuit of the Captain, who has long been a thorn in the side of people who love order. If he is caught, it can be shown that he was involved in the treason; and there it is."

"So the Captain has not been caught?"

"He had not been when I heard the news."

"And how did you hear it?"

"From one of the guardsmen, who happens to be of my acquaintance. I saw them as they came through Châteaudun yesterday afternoon, on their return from this business. We had very little time for talking."

"Then you were not with them at Lavardin?"

"I with them? Certainly not, Monsieur. Why should I have been with them? No; I have been staying in this part of the country for my own pleasure the past few days: I think of buying some apple orchards near Châteaudun. — I fancied you would be interested in this news."

"I am, dear Monsieur de Pepicot, — infinitely. I am sorry I must leave you now, but I have business of some haste. I thank you heartily, and hope we may meet again. You know where La Tour-noire is."

Five minutes later, with my baskets slung before me, and having left one horse at the inn, I was riding out of Bonneval to tell the Countess that she was free.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE MERCY OF CAPTAIN FERRAGANT

I HAD come to a place where the road runs, narrower than ever, between banks covered with bushes. All at once the perfect loneliness and silence were broken by three or four men leaping out of the bushes in front of me and barring the way, one presenting a pistol, another a long pike, while a third prepared to seize my rein. I instantly spurred forward, to make a dash for it: at the same time I was conscious that other fellows had sprung into the road behind me. The knave caught both reins close to the bit, and hung on under the horse's head, while the poor animal tried to rear. I drew sword and dagger, and leaned forward to run this fellow through. As I made my thrust, my senses suddenly went out in a kind of fire-streaked darkness. As I afterwards learned, I had been struck on the back of the head with a loaded cudgel by one of the unseen men be-

hind. When I came to myself I was lying on the earth in a little bushy hollow away from the road: my hands were tied behind me, and around each ankle was fastened a rope, of which one of my assailants held the loose end. These two fellows and their four comrades were seated on the ground, eating the fowls and drinking the wine and milk I had provided for the Countess. One of them wore my sword, another had my dagger. My purse lay empty on the grass, and my horse was hobbled with the strap from my baskets.

My first thought was of the key. Searching about with my eyes, I presently saw it, with the other one, at the edge of the bushes, where they had doubtless been thrown as of no value.

My head was aching badly, but that was nothing to the terror in my heart for the Countess: if I was hindered from going to her, who was to give her aid? — nay, who was to release her from that dark hiding-place? She would die for lack of food and air, — her cell of refuge would be her tomb!

“Ah!” exclaimed one of the robbers; “the worthy young gentleman comes to life.”

“You are right,” said I, trying to hit the proper mood in which to deal with them. “I’m not sorry, either, as I was in some haste to get on. My friends, as you appear to have emptied me of everything that

can be of any use to you, what do you say to allowing my poor remaining self to go about my business?"

"And to give information about us as soon as you get to Chateaudun, eh?" said one.

I was satisfied to let them think I was bound for Chateaudun.

"No," I replied. "Poor as I am, the toll you have collected from me is not as much as my necessity of finishing my journey. So if you will untie me, and can find it in your hearts to give me back my horse — or at worst to let me go afoot, — I will cry quits, and give you my word of honour to forget you completely."

"You speak well, young gentleman: but it's not to us that you need speak. We shall be taking you presently to one you can make proposals to."

"Why should you waste time in taking me to your leader, when you are quite able to make terms yourselves?" said I. "Come. I can offer him no more than I can offer you. Suppose it were a hundred crowns: he would have the lion's share of it, and you poor fellows would get but a small part. If I deal with you alone, he need be never the wiser, and you will have the whole sum to divide among you."

"And how would you get the five hundred crowns?"

"I said one hundred: I would get them by going

for them: I would give you my promise on the honour of a gentleman."

The ruffians laughed. "No," said the one who had spoken most. "You would have to stay with us, and send for them. And our leader is the one to manage that. He will make you a fine, fair offer, no doubt."

My heart sank. I tried persuasion, but nothing could move them. Doubtless each was afraid of the others, or they were very strongly under the dominion of their chief.

I asked them to give me back my keys, whereupon one of them put the keys in his own wallet. They finished the food and drink, and made ready to depart. Their preparations consisted mainly of blind-folding me with a thick band of cloth, putting me on my horse, and tying together under the animal's belly the ropes that bound my ankles. Then a man mounted behind me, I heard another take the rein to lead, the horse was turned around several times so as to confuse my sense of direction, and we set off. We presently crossed a stream, and a little later I knew by sound and smell that we were in the forest. When we had traversed a part of it, the horse was again turned around twice or thrice, and we continued on our way. All the time I was

thinking of her who waited for me in the darkness of her tomb-like prison.

At last, by feeling the sun upon me and by other signs, I knew that we had come to a space clear of trees. We stopped a moment, and I heard calls exchanged and a gate opened; and then my horse's feet passed from turf to a very rough, irregular pavement. The sound of horses in their stalls at one side, the cooing of pigeons at the other, the gate, the rude paving, the remote situation, all taken together informed me that we were in an enclosed farm-yard. We stopped a second time, and my ankle ropes being then detached from each other, I was hauled down from the horse. The men with me were now greeted by others, who came apparently from the side buildings. I was led forward into a stone-floored passage, where I had to sit on a bench, guarded by I know not how many, while one went up a flight of stairs near at hand, evidently to give an account of their prize to somebody in authority. Presently a voice from above called down, "Bring the prisoner hither," and I was taken upstairs and through a doorway.

My entrance drew an ejaculation from a person already in the room, who thereupon gave orders in a low voice. I was made to sit on the floor, and my ankles were tied close together. A chain was then wound ingeniously about my ankle-bonds, my

legs, and the cords at my wrists; passed through a hole in the floor and around a cross beam, and finally fastened with a padlock, in such a way that I was secured beyond power of extricating myself.

“Now go, and wait in the passage,” said the voice in which the previous orders had been given. “But first take that rag from his eyes. He may as well see: it will amuse him, and will not hurt us, — I will take care of that.”

The band was removed, and I found myself in a bare, plastered room with a barred window. In front of me stood a large man with a mask on his face. Where the mask ended, his beard began, so that he presented a visage entirely of black. The robbers who had brought me hither went out, closing the door, and I was left alone with this man.

He regarded me a moment; then dropped into a chair, with a low grunt of laughter.

“That it should be this fool, of all fools!” he began. “Who shall say there is no such thing as luck? Monsieur, I am sure it will please you to know into whose hands you have fallen.”

He took off his mask, and there was the red-splashed face of Captain Ferragant.

Surprise made me dumb for a moment, for he had hitherto disguised his voice. He sat looking

at me with a most cruel expression of malevolent triumph.

“So, this is where you have fled, — and you are the chief of the robbers!” said I.

“Call me that if you like. It matters nothing what names you prefer to use. No ears will ever hear them but mine; and mine will not be long afflicted with the sound.”

I shuddered, for I knew the implacability of this man, and my death meant the death of the Countess, — death in the dark, mouldy basement of the tower, death by stifling and starvation while she waited in vain for me, a slow and solitary death, rendered the more agonizing to her mind by suspense and fears. And this horrible fate must needs be hers just when the cause of her sorrows and dangers had been removed! It was a thought not to be endured.

“You will have your jest,” said I. “But I see no reason why you should bear me malice. The Count de Lavardin is now a dead man, I hear. I can no longer be against him, nor you for him. Therefore bygones should be bygones, and I suppose you will make terms with me as with any other man who happened to come before you as I do.”

“You do me an injustice, young gentleman: I am not so mercenary, — I do not always make terms. It is true, I served the Count for pay; that is what

my company is for, and if he had not gone out of his château to hunt his wife, we might have defended the place till the enemy was tired out. But he allowed himself to be caught in the road, — you have heard the news, then? What do they say of me?”

“That when you saw the Count was killed, you ran away.”

“Yes, I was of no use to the Count then, and his own men in the chateau were not well inclined toward me. They were for giving up the place, the moment he was dead. I thought best to save my good fellows for better service elsewhere.”

“Then your company and the band of robbers in this forest are the same?”

“If you call them robbers, — they forage when there is need. I did not have them all at the château. The good fellows who brought you here were not at Lavardin with me. It is well, when one is in a place, to have resources outside. And so we meet again, my young interloper! You were rude to me once or twice at Lavardin. I shall pay you for that, and settle scores on behalf of my friend the Count as well.”

“How much ransom do you want?” I asked bluntly. “Name a sum within possibility, and let me go for it immediately: you know well you can



rely upon my honour to deliver it promptly at any place safe for both of us, and to keep all a secret."

"Do not insult me again. I have told you I am above purchase."

Despite his jesting tone, my hope began to fall.

"You are not above prudence, at least," I said. "I assure you there are people who will move earth and heaven to find what has become of me, and whose powers of vengeance are not light."

"If I went in fear of vengeance, my child, I should never pass an easy moment. I have learned how to evade it, — or, better still, to turn it back on those who would inflict it. I fear nobody. When the game is not worth the risk, one can always run away, as I did from Lavardin when the Count's death threw his men into a panic."

"Good God!" I cried, giving way to my feelings; "what will move you, then? What do you wish me to do? Shall I humiliate myself to plead for my life? shall I beg mercy? If I must descend to that, I will do so."

For you will remember another life than mine was staked upon my fate, and time was flying. How long could she endure without food, without drink, without renewal of air, in that locked-up place of darkness?

"Mercy, I beg," I cried, in a voice broken by fears for her.

"You have hit upon the right way, at last," said the Captain, and my heart bounded in spite of his continued irony of voice and manner. "You beg for mercy, you shall have it. I will give you your life, and your liberty as well: on your part, you will tell me where the Countess de Lavardin is; as soon as I have made sure you have told the truth, I will set you free."

I gazed at him in silence.

"Is not that merciful?" said he; "a full pardon for all your affronts and offences, in return for a trifling piece of information?"

"It is a piece of information I cannot give you," I replied.

"It is a waste of time and words to try to deceive me," said the red Captain. "A young gentleman who risks so much for a lady as you have done, and accomplishes so much for her, — yes, they were wonders of prowess and courage, I admit, and I compliment you upon them, — a young gentleman who does all that for a lady does not so soon lose knowledge of her whereabouts. Do not trifle with me, Monsieur. Where is the Countess? There is no other way by which you can save yourself."

"Do you think, then, a man who has shown the

courage and prowess you mention, for the sake of a lady, would save himself by betraying her?"

"Oh, you are young, and may have many years before you — a life of great success and honour. There are other beautiful ladies in the world. In a very short time you can forget this one."

"I think it is for you to forget her," said I on the impulse. "As for me, I would rather die!"

Ah, yes, it was easy enough to die, if that were all: but to leave her to die, and in such a manner, was another thing. Yet I knew she would prefer death, in its worst form, to falling into the unrestrained hands of the red Captain. The man's eyes, from the moment when he introduced her name, betrayed the eagerness of his new hope to make himself her master, — though he still controlled his speech. I say his new hope, for it must have arisen upon the death of the Count, during whose life, not daring openly to play the rival, he had found his only satisfaction in a revenge which provided that none might have what was denied to him. It was for me to decide now whether she should die or find herself at the mercy of Captain Ferragant. Was it right that I should decide for her as she would decide for herself? Was it for me to consign her to death, though I was certain that would be her own choice? Even though the Captain found her, was

not life, with its possible chance of future escape, of her being able to move him by tears and innocence, of some friendly interposition of fate, preferable to the sure alternative doom?

“I will leave you to make up your mind quietly,” said the Captain. “When you are ready to speak to the point, call to the men in the passage, — one of them will come to me. The door will be left open. I hope you will not be slow in choosing the sensible course: I cannot give you many hours for consideration.”

He went out, addressed some orders to four or five men who sat on a bench facing my door, and disappeared: I heard his feet descending the stairs. My door was left wide open, so that I was directly in the gaze of the men. But even if I had been unobserved, I could not have moved from the place where I sat. Any effort to break my bonds, either of wrist or ankle, by sheer strength, was but to cause weakness and pain. My arms ached from the constraint of their position, and, because of them behind me, it was impossible to lie at full length on my back. Nor would the chain, without cutting into my thighs, permit me to lie on either side. I was thus unable to change even my attitude.

But my discomforts of body were nothing in presence of the question that tore my mind. Minutes

passed; time stretched into hours: still I discussed with myself, to which of the fates at my choice should I deliver her? Should I give her to death, or to the arms of the red Captain? Little as she feared the first, much as she loathed the second, dared I take it upon myself to assign her to death? Had it been mere death, without the horrors of darkness and desertion, without the anxious wonder as to why I failed her, I should not have been long in deciding upon that. For that would be her wish, and I should not survive her. Let us both die, I should have said; for what will life be to her after she has fallen into the hands of this villain, and what to me after I have delivered her into them? But the peculiar misery of the death that threatened her, kept the problem still busy in my mind.

And yet I could not bring myself to yield her to the Captain.

The day had become afternoon, and I still debated. The Countess must have expected me to return before this time. What was her state now? what were her conjectures? Ah, thought I, if we had not found our way to that lonely tower, if the storm had not come up the previous night, if we had started to leave the forest earlier! — nay, if I had had the prevision, upon hearing of the presence of robbers, to make her turn back to Châteaudun with me, and lodge

quietly there until the Mother Superior of the convent could be sounded, and a safe way of approach be ascertained, all would now be well. We should have heard in the meantime of the Count's death. Yes, everything had gone wrong since the Countess had taken the road for the forest. The third of Blaise Tripault's maxims which he had learned from the monk came back to me with all the force of hapless coincidence:

*"Never leave a highway for a byway."*

The thought of Blaise Tripault made me think of my father. What a mockery it was to know that I, chained helpless to the floor in this remote stronghold of ruffians, was the son of him, the Sieur de la Tournoire, the invincible warrior before whose sword no man could stay, and who would have rushed to the world's end to save me or any one I loved! To consider my need, and his power to help, and that only his ignorance of my situation stood between, was so vexing that in my bitterness of soul, regardless of the men in the passage, I cried out to the empty air, "Oh, my father! If you but knew!"

And then, for a moment, as if the bare wall were no impediment, I saw a vision of my father, with his dauntless brow and grizzled beard, his great long sword at his side, riding toward me among green trees.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE SWORD OF LA TOURNOIRE

THE light softened and faded into that of evening. Another set of men took the places of those outside my door. No food nor drink was brought me, and I supposed the Captain hoped by this neglect to reduce me the sooner to a yielding state. But I was even glad to have to undergo some of the discomforts which the Countess must needs be enduring. I gave up hope of her life or my own, and, leaning forward so as to get some relief of position, I fell into a kind of drowsy lassitude.

Suddenly, through my window, which overlooked the court-yard, I heard a low call at the gate, which was answered. Presently I heard the gate close, and assumed it had been opened to let in the man who had uttered the call. About a minute after that, there was a considerable noise in the yard, as of men hastily assembling. Then came the voice of the Captain, apparently addressing the whole com-

pany. When he finished, there was a general movement of feet, as of men dispersing about the yard, and this was followed by complete silence.

The men in the passage were now joined by a comrade, who spoke to them rapidly in a low tone. They whispered to one another in some excitement, but did not leave their places nor take their eyes from me.

The next sound I heard was of the tread of horses approaching. My curiosity now aroused, I strained my ears. The hoof-beats came to the gate, and then I heard a loud knock, followed by no other sound than of the pawing and snorting of the horses as they stood. There must have been at least a score of them.

Presently the unheeded knock was repeated, and then a quick, virile voice called out:

“Hola, within there! Open the gate, in the name of the King!”

My heart leaped. The voice was that of the royal guardsman who had saved the Countess from the robbers the previous evening. But his party was now evidently much larger than before.

No answer was given to his demand. The red Captain's intent apparently was to make these newcomers believe the place deserted. I had an impulse to shout the truth, but I saw my guards watching



me, their hands on their weapons, and knew that my first word would be the signal for my death. So I kept silence.

“If you do not open the gate at once,” the guardsman cried, “we will open it for ourselves, in our own way.”

I now heard footsteps shuffling across the yard, and then one of the robbers spoke, in the quavering tones of an old man :

“Pardon, Monsieur. Pardon, I pray, but it is impossible for me to open. I am all alone here in charge of this place, which is empty and deserted, and I’m forbidden to open the gate to anybody but the master. He would kill me if I disobeyed, and besides that, I have taken a vow. There is nothing here that you can want, Monsieur.”

“There is shelter for the night to be had here, and that we mean to have. We are on the business of the King, and I command you to open.”

“I dare not, Monsieur. I should imperil my life and my soul. There is a lodge in the forest a mile to the east, and the keeper will see to all your wants : there is plenty of shelter, food for yourselves, hay for your horses, everything you can need. Here all is dismantled and empty.”

“Old man, you are lying. Unbar the gate in a moment, or your life will indeed be in danger.”

To this the "old man" gave no answer, except to come away from the gate with the same simulated walk of an aged person.

I heard the horsemen discussing in low tones. Then, to my dismay, came the sound of hoofs again, this time moving away. Now I was more than ever minded to cry out, but my guards were ready to spring upon me with their daggers. I might have sought this speedy death, but for the sudden thought that the withdrawal of the royal guardsmen might be only temporary.

I know not how many minutes passed. The sound of the horses had died out for some time. I became sensible of the tramp of men's feet. Were the guardsmen returning without their horses? Suddenly the red Captain's voice arose in the courtyard:

"To the walls, you with firearms! Shoot them down as they try to batter in the gate! All the rest, stand with me to kill them if they enter!"

The tramp of the guardsmen came swiftly near. I heard the reports of muskets and pistols. There was a loud thud, as of some sort of ram — a fallen branch or trunk from the forest — being borne powerfully against the gate. This was answered by defiant, profane shouts and more loud detonations. My guards in the passage groaned, exclaimed,

and clenched their weapons, mad to be in the fray. I could only listen and wait.

There was a second thud against the gate, amidst more cries and shots. And soon came a third, the sound being this time prolonged into a crash of timber. A shout of triumph from the invaders, a yell of execration from the red Captain and his men, and the clash of steel, told that the gate had given way.

“Follow close, gentlemen! Trust me to clear a path!” cried a hearty voice, cheerful to the point of mirth, which thrilled my soul.

“Ay, follow him close!” cried the leader of the guardsmen; “follow the sword of La Tournoire!”

I could have shouted for joy, but that it was now worth while postponing death by minutes.

The noise of clashing swords increased and came nearer, as if the guardsmen were pouring in through the gateway and driving the defenders back toward the house. Now and then came the sound of a pike or reversed musket meeting steel armour, and all the time fierce exclamations rose from both parties. There was no more firing; doubtless the melee was too close and general for anybody to reload.

The men in the passage, as the tumult grew and approached, became as restless as dogs in leash that whine and jump to be in the fray. At last one of

them ran into my room and looked out of the window.

“Death of the devil, how they are at it!” he cried, for the information of his comrades outside my door. “I think we shall be wanted in a minute or two. These cursed intruders have forced the gateway. Our fellows are twice as many as they, but their heads and bodies are in steel, — all but one, a middle-aged man with gray in his beard. He has no armour on, but he leads the others. Body of Satan! you should see him clear the ground about him. He thrusts in all directions at once: his sword is as long as a man, and it darts as quickly as the tongue of a snake. Ha! it has just cut down old Cricharde. — And now it has stung Galparoux. — Holy Beelzebub, what a man! He fights like a fiend, and all the time with a gay face as if he were at his sport. — Ah! there he has let daylight into poor Boirac. — But now — good! — at last our Captain has planted himself in front of this devil: it was high time: he will find his match now. By God, it will be worth looking at, the fight between the red Captain and this stranger, — there aren’t two such men in France. They are taking each other’s measure now, — each one sees what sort of stuff he has run against. Ah!”

What the last exclamation meant, I could not

know. The man's attention had become too close for further speech. But I supposed that a pass had been made between my father and the red Captain, and that it had been nothing decisive, for the watcher's interest continued at the extreme tension: he kept his face against the iron bars of the window, and made no sound beyond frequent short ejaculations. The men in the passage called to him for further news, but he did not heed them. To my ears the fighting continued as general as before, with the shouts of many throats and the clash of many weapons, so that I could not at all distinguish the single combat between my father and the red Captain from the rest of the fray.

Presently the man gave a howl of rage. "Our Captain is being forced back!" he cried. "We are getting the worst of the fight everywhere. It's too much! — we are needed down there! To the devil with orders! — the Captain will be glad enough if we turn the tide. And we'd better try our luck down there than be taken here, for short time they'll give us for prayers, my children." While speaking he had moved from the window to my door.

"Certainly this prisoner is safe enough," answered one of the men, whereupon he and the others in the passage ran down the stairs.

But the man who had been at the window turned

to me. "Safe enough, — yes, so it looks," said he. "Young man, the Captain must think you a magician, to take so much pains against your escaping. If it came to the worst, I was to kill you, and the time seems to have arrived: so, if you'll pardon me —"

"You will be a great fool," said I, as he approached with his sword drawn; "for if you are taken alive my intervention will save your neck."

"How do you know it will?"

"By the fact that the gentleman down there whose fighting you so admire is my father."

"Indeed? You are a gentleman: do you give your word of honour for that?"

"Yes; and to speak for you if I am alive when your side is finally defeated."

"Very good, Monsieur. I will hold you to that." Upon this he left me and followed his comrades down the stairs.

His footfalls had scarcely ceased upon the stairway, when other sounds began to come from the same direction, — those of conflict in the entrance hall below. Somebody had drawn his antagonist, or been forced by him, into the house. There was the quick, irregular stamp of booted feet on the stone floor, the keen music of sword striking sword. If the fight spread generally into the house, and the de-

fenders fled to the upper rooms, my position must become more critical. So I listened rather to this noise in the hallway than to the tumult in the courtyard. By the sound of the steel coming nearer, and that of the footfalls changing somewhat, I presently knew that one of the fighters had sought the vantage — or disadvantage — of the staircase. But the other evidently pushed him hard, for soon both combatants had reached the landing at the turn of the stairs, as was manifest from a sudden increase of their noise in my ears. I could now hear their short ejaculations as well as the other sounds. They continued to approach: I listened for a stumble on the stairs, to be followed by a death-cry: but these men were apparently heedful as to their steps, and finally they were both upon the level footing of the passage outside my room. I wondered if this fight would be over before it could be opposite my doorway. In a few moments I was answered. Into my narrow view came the large figure of the red Captain, without a doublet, his muscular arms bare, his shirt open and soaked with perspiration, his upper body heaving rapidly as he breathed, his face streaming, his eyes fixed upon the enemy whose swift rapier he parried with wonderful skill. The light of evening was dim in the passage, and perhaps for that reason the Cap-

tain backed into my room. His adversary followed instantly.

“Father!” I cried, as the *Sieur de la Tournoire* appeared in the doorway: in my emotion I thought not how I endangered him by distracting his attention.

But he was not to be thrown off his guard. He moved his head a little to the side, so as to catch a glimpse of me behind the Captain, but this did not prevent his adroitly turning a quick thrust which his enemy made on the instant of my cry.

“*Hola, Henri!*” said my father, with perfect calmness except for his quickness of breath. “What the devil are you doing here?”

“Sitting chained to the floor,” I replied.

At this the Captain suddenly leaped back almost to where I was, and I suppose his intention was to place himself eventually where he would have me between him and my father and could kill me without ceasing to face the latter. But he may have considered an attempt to pass over me as unsafe for his subsequent footing, and so his next movement was sidewise: my father, following close, gave him work every moment. The Captain again stepping backward, I was now at his right and a little in front, so that, if he could gain but a spare second, he could send a finishing thrust my way. With



my head turned so as to keep my eyes upon him, I could see by his look that he was determined not to risk my outliving him.

My father, too busy in meeting the Captain's lunges, and in trying what thrust might elude his defence, thought best to expend no more breath in talk with me, and so the fighting went on without words. Suppose, thought I, my father kills the Captain but the Captain first kills me? Had I not better now tell my father to seek the Tower of Morlon and release a person confined there? But if I did that, the Captain would hear, and suppose he killed my father as well as me! I held my tongue.

The Captain now maintained his position, neither giving ground nor pressing forward. The two combatants were between me and the window, through which still came sounds of struggle from the yard below. But these sounds were fewer, except those of cheers, which grew more frequent.

"Good! Our friends are gaining the day!" said my father to me.

"But you, Messieurs, shall not crow over it!" cried the Captain, and made a long thrust, as swift as lightning. My father caught it on the guard of his hilt, within short distance of his breast, at the same instant stepping back. The Captain did not follow, but darted his sword at me, with the cry,

“Not for you the Countess!” I contracted my body and thought myself done for. My father’s impulsive forward movement, however, disconcerted the Captain’s arm in the very moment of his lunge, and his point but feebly stung my side and flew back again, his guard recovered none too soon to save himself. My father’s thrusts became now so quick and continuous that the Captain fell back to gain breath. My father drove him to the wall. Shouting a curse, the Captain thrust for my father’s midriff. My father, with a swift movement, received the sword between his arm and body, and at the same instant ran his own rapier into the Captain’s unguarded front, pushed it through his lung, and pinned him to the wall.

The Captain’s arms dropped, his head hung forward, and as soon as the sword was drawn out, he tumbled lifeless to the floor.

My father leaned against the wall till he regained a little breath and energy; then he wiped his brow and sword, and came over to me.

“How have they got you trussed up?” he asked. “And how came you into their hands?—I should be amazed to find you here, if I hadn’t seen stranger things before now.”

While he cut the cords that bound my ankles and wrists, I told him how I had been waylaid. “I



“MY FATHER’S THRUSTS BECAME NOW SO QUICK AND CONTINUOUS.”



was going with food and wine to a friend who lies locked in a deserted tower called Morlon. She is ill to death, and may now be dead for lack of food and air to keep up her strength. I must go to her — ”

“ A woman, then ? ”

“ Yes, a lady : I will tell you all, but there is no time to lose now. The tower is in this forest. I must find my way there at once.”

“ Patience, a moment,” said my father. “ Your chain is locked, I see : — but no matter, — I can loosen it so that you can wriggle through.” By having cut the cords, around which the chain had been passed, he had relieved the tautness, and was now able to do what he promised. He then took off my boots, and, grasping me under the arms, drew me backward out of the loosened coils as I moved them downward with my hands. At last I stood a free man. I put on my boots, took the Captain’s sword, and accompanied my father down into the courtyard.

The fight was now over there. Of the royal guardsmen, all in steel caps and corselets, like the small party of them I had seen the previous evening, some were wiping their faces and swords, and others were caring for the hurts of comrades. Some of the robbers lay dead, several were wounded, and

the rest, having yielded their weapons, were looking after their own disabled, under the direction of guardsmen. I recognized a number of the rascals as men I had seen at the Château de Lavardin. The commander of the troop of guards, he whom I had met before and whose vigorous voice I had recognized, greeted my father with a look of congratulation, and showed surprise at seeing me.

“’Tis a day of events,” said my father. “I have killed the Count’s accomplice, and found my son. — Nay, there was no hope of that Captain’s surrendering.”

“My faith! — then your two quests are accomplished at the same moment,” said the leader of the guardsmen. “And, for another wonder, your son turns out to be a person I have already met. But your friend, Monsieur?” This inquiry was to me, and made with sudden solicitude.

“Locked in the tower of Morlon, waiting for me to come with food, — perhaps dying or dead. — Monsieur, I was brought here blindfold: but I must find the way back to the tower of Morlon without delay, — it is somewhere in this forest.”

“No doubt some of these gentry know the way,” said the guardsman, indicating the robbers. “We’ll make it a condition of his life for one of them to guide us.”

“You make me your life-long debtor, Monsieur,” I cried. “And one of them has the key: I think it is he lying yonder. As for food and wine —”

“We are not without those,” said the guardsman. “Our horses and supplies are near at hand.”

I went among the dead and wounded to find the man who had taken possession of my keys. Him I found, but the keys were not upon him. Supposing he had given them to his master, I ran upstairs and examined the pockets of the Captain, but in vain. Where to look next I knew not, so I returned to the courtyard and made known my unsuccess.

“Tut!” said my father; “a door is but a door, and we can break down that of your tower as we broke down this gate. This gentleman” — meaning the leader of the guardsmen — “has most courteously offered to accompany us, with part of his noble troop, and he has chosen a guide from among the prisoners.”

“Ay, they all know the tower,” said the guardsman, “but this fellow appears the most sensible. — Now, my man, how long will it take us, your comrades bearing the pine trunk with which we rammed this gate, to reach the tower of Morlon?”

“Two hours, Monsieur, I should say,” replied the robber.

“It is too much,” said the guardsman. “You

will lead us thither in an hour at the utmost, or at the end of the hour you shall hang to the tree I then happen to be under." He thereupon gave orders to the guardsmen, and to the prisoners. As night would overtake us in the forest, he had a brief search made of the outhouses, and a number of dry pine sticks were found, to serve as torches. Our party was to go mounted, except the robbers impressed to carry the battering ram: so I went to the stalls at one side of the yard, and found my own horse, chewing hay in fraternal companionship with the animals which had doubtless brought Captain Ferragant and his men from Lavardin.

As I led out my horse, I suddenly bethought me of the man for whose life I had promised to speak. During the final preparations for our start, I looked again among the robbers, wondering why this man had not forced himself upon my attention. But I soon found the reason: he lay on his side, and when I turned him over I saw he was pierced between two ribs and had no life left to plead for.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE MOUSTACHES OF BRIGNAN DE BRIGNAN

My father, the leader of the guardsmen, and several of his men walked, while I rode, to the nearby edge of encircling woods, the defeated robbers bearing the young tree-trunk. Here my father and the guardsmen mounted, their horses having been tied to the trees. A pair of panniers containing wine, bread, and cold meat, was placed across my father's horse, a very strong animal, and, torches being lighted, we proceeded through the forest. The guide led, being attached to a halter, of which the commander of the guardsmen held the loose end. After the commander, my father and I came, and behind us the burdened prisoners, who were flanked and followed by the other guardsmen.

On the way, I told my father who it was that lay in the tower, and gave him a brief account of my whole adventure at Lavardin and in the forest.

He applauded my conduct, though counselling me in future to look well before I leaped; and he approved of my offer to the Countess of the hospitality of La Tournoire.

"But what still makes me wonder," said I, "is that you should have found me here, so far from Paris, whither you knew I was bound, and from Vendome, whither Nicolas must have told you I was going."

"But in truth my being here is very simple," said he. "As soon as Nicolas came back to La Tournoire with your message the day after you set out, I started for Paris to solicit your pardon for the affair at La Flèche. Six days later I presented myself to the Duke de Sully, who immediately took me for an audience of the King. There was a deal of talk about the scandalous disregard of the edict against duels, the great quantity of good blood wasted almost every day, the too frequent granting of pardons, and all that. But in the end Henri would not refuse me, and I have your pardon now in my pocket. But you must not be rash another time: I promised for you, and assured the King you were no fire-eater and had received great provocation."

"Trust me to be prudent," said I.

"Good! As you had not yet arrived in Paris,"

continued my father. "I supposed you had been delayed at Vendome, whither, as you say, Nicolas told me you were going. So I thought I would start for home by way of Vendome, as you might still be there and perhaps in some scrape or other, or I might meet you on the road between there and Paris. I stayed overnight in Paris, as the Duke had invited me to wait upon him the next day. I went and was very well received. As I was about to take my leave, I mentioned that I was going to travel by Vendome. 'Ah,' said the Duke, 'then, if you wish, you may take a hand in a little affair which will be like an echo of the old busy days.' I opened my eyes at this, and the Duke told me that evidence had just been brought by one of his spies, which warranted the arrest of a powerful malcontent in the neighbourhood of Vendome, who had long been under suspicion, — in short, the Count de Lavardin. A party of royal guards was about to be sent off at once to take him in his chateau at Montoire, four leagues beyond Vendome, and I might go with them as a volunteer, or in any case I might have their company on my journey. I was quite ready for any affair that had a taste of the old service in it, especially as these treasonable great lords sometimes make a stout resistance in their chateaux. And so I had the honour of being introduced to

these gentlemen and becoming for the time their comrade. That same afternoon I set out with them for Montoire, and we arrived there last Sunday."

"Ah! you must have passed through Vendome while we were in seclusion there."

"No doubt. That Count's business had to be attended to before he got wind of our arrival, and so there was no time for inquiring about you at Vendome. We came upon the Count and a party of attendants in the road, not a quarter of a league from his château. As we heard at the château afterwards, he had been searching the roads far and wide for his wife, who had fled from his cruelties. He had the daring to resist arrest, and there was some fighting, in which he was killed. It appears that the fight and his fall were seen by watchers from the tower of his chateau, and before we could arrive at that place his accomplice, this Captain Ferragant, who was in the château at the time, made his escape. As soon as we got to the château, we heard of this, and, as the Captain also was wanted, there was nothing to do but give chase. A few of the guardsmen were left to hold the chateau in the King's name, and the rest of us, with no more than a sup and a bite, made off after this Captain. He had so many followers with him, that he was not difficult to trace, and for two days we kept his track,

until we lost it at the edge of this forest. From what we learned at Chateaudun, we guessed that his refuge was somewhere in the forest. That was yesterday afternoon: we at once broke up into small parties to search the forest, planning to reunite at a chosen place to-day at noon."

"It was one of those parties that saved the Countess from the robbers," said I gratefully.

"Ay, and there your story crosses mine. As for the ruffians who attacked the Countess, they escaped without affording a clue to the Captain's whereabouts, — for doubtless they were of his band, though this was not certain. When our parties met to-day, one of them brought a forester who offered to show the way to the Captain's hiding-place if he were allowed to leave before coming in sight of it. We made full preparations, and you know the rest. At first we thought our forester had fooled us, and that the place we had come to was what it appeared, a solitary farmstead in a clearing of the forest. But in such a case, it is always best to make sure, and faith, that is what we did. So you see I chanced to find you all the sooner for not having had time to look for you. But indeed it was a timely meeting."

In about an hour after the time of starting, we came to a clear space, in the midst of which was the

tower we sought. We could see it by the starlight before we drew near with our torches. We all dismounted, and with a fast-beating heart, I found the door. It was still locked. Listening at the key-hole, I could hear no sound. I called out, "Louis!" thinking she would understand I had company to whom her sex need not be known. I wished to warn her of our assault upon the door, so that she might stay clear of danger thereby. But no answer came, though I called several times. I was now in great fear lest she had died. My father, who read my feelings in my face, suggested that she might have fallen into very deep unconsciousness, and that the best thing to do was to break in the door forthwith, as carefully as possible, trusting she might not be where there was chance of anything striking. As the place where I had left her lying was not opposite the door, and there was no reason to suppose she had chosen another, I gave up the attempt to warn her, and without further loss of time we made ready to attack the door. All the men in the party, both guardsmen and prisoners, laid hold of the tree-trunk, by means of halters and ropes fastened around it, my father and I placing ourselves at the head. The commander of the guardsmen, who was immediately behind me, called out the orders by which we moved in unison. Start-

ing from a short distance, we ran straight for the tower, and swung the tree forward against the door at the moment of stopping. A most violent shock was produced, but the lock and hinges still held. We repeated this operation twice. Upon our third charge, the door flew inward. Leaving the trunk to the others, I hastened into the dark, close basement, and groped my way to where I had left the Countess.

“Madame! — Louis!” I called softly, feeling about in the darkness.

A weak voice answered, — a voice like that of one just wakened from profound sleep:

“Henri, is it you? — Mon dieu, I am so glad! — I feared some evil had befallen you.”

“Ah, Louis, you are living, — thank God!”

“Living, yes: I have been asleep. Once I awoke, and wondered why you had not returned. I prayed for you, and then I must have slept again. But what was it awakened me? — was there not a loud noise before I heard your voice? — Who are those men at the door with torches?”

I introduced my father, who, regarding her in the torchlight, and showing as tender a solicitude as a woman’s, soon came to the conclusion that her state was no worse than one of extreme weakness for want of food and fresh air. He carried her

out, laid her tenderly on a cloak, and administered such food and wine as were good for her. She submitted with the docility and trust of a child.

Leaving her for awhile, my father and I consulted with the leader of the guardsmen, and it was decided that the Countess, my father, and I should pass the night at the tower, the weather being warm and clear. The guardsmen would return with their prisoners to the scene of their recent battle, where much was to be put to rights. On the morrow they would rejoin us, and we should all proceed to Bonneval, where my father's deposition could be added to the report which the leader of the arresting party would have to deliver in Paris in lieu of the Count and Captain themselves.

I could not let the leader go, even for the night, without expressing the gratitude under which I must ever feel to him, for, though he was still ignorant of the identity of the Countess, there was no concealing from him that the supposed youth was a person very near my heart.

"Pouf!" said he, in his manly way; "'tis all chance. I have done nothing for you, but if I had done much I should have been repaid already in the acquaintance of Monsieur de la Tournoire."

"A truce to flattery," said my father. "It is



I who am the gainer by the acquaintance of Monsieur Brignan de Brignan."

"Eh! Brignan de Brignan!" I echoed.

"That is this gentleman's name," said my father, wondering at my surprise. "Have we been so busy that I have not properly made you known to him before?"

I gazed at the gentleman's moustaches: they were indeed rather longer than the ordinary. He, too, looked his astonishment at the effect of his name upon me.

"Pardon me, Monsieur," said I. "I have been staring like a rustic. I owe you an explanation of my ill manners. I will give it frankly: it may provide you with laughter. What I am now, I know not, but three weeks ago I was a fool." I then told him how I had been taunted by a young lady, whose name I did not mention, and with what particular object I had so recently started for Paris. This was news to my father also, who laughed without restraint. Brignan de Brignan, though certainly amused, kept his mirth within bounds, and replied:

"Faith, I know not any young lady in your part of France who has a right to glory in my personal appearance, even if I were an Apollo, — who, by the way, is not represented with moustaches. But I believe I know who this girl may be, — I have

met such a one in Paris, and avoided her as a pert little minx. As for your folly, as you call it, it was no more foolish than many a thing I have done."

He had the breeding not to add, "At your age," and I loved him for that. He and his men now set out upon their return to the farmstead, and my father and I, after devising a more comfortable couch for the Countess just within the open doorway of the tower, slept and watched by turns outside.

In the morning the Countess, partaking of more food, was in better strength and spirits, and had the curiosity to ask how my father came to be there. In telling her, I broke the news of the Count's death. For a moment she was startled, and then pity showed itself in her eyes and words, — pity for the man who had been swayed by such passions and delusions, and who had died in his sin with none else to shed a tear for him. The Captain's death, of which I next informed her, did not move her as much.

The turn of affairs caused a change of plan. She now resolved (as I had foreseen) to return to Lavardin and do such honour to her husband's memory as she might. Though his estates would probably, in all the circumstances, be adjudged forfeit to the Crown, some provision would doubtless

be made for his widow. In any case, she might be sure of every courtesy from the officer in command of the guardsmen now occupying the château for the King, and there were certain jewels, apparel, and other possessions of her own which could not be withheld from her.

In the afternoon, when Brignan de Brignan and his comrades reappeared, the Countess was able to ride; and that evening we were all in Bonneval. Monsieur de Brignan had taken possession of several things found in an iron-bound chest where Captain Ferragant had kept his treasures. Among others were two papers stolen from me by the robbers, — the incriminating fragment of a letter to the Count, and the note from the Countess which I had found upon Monsieur de Merri. The former I destroyed, at the fire in the inn kitchen: the latter I kept, and keep to this day. Besides these, there were my purse; a quantity of gold, out of which I repaid myself the amount I had been robbed of; and the two keys, which I subsequently restored to the Chateau de Lavardin, whence they had come.

We stayed the night at Bonneval. The next day the guardsmen started for Paris, and our party of three for Montoire. As I took my leave of Brignan de Brignan before the inn gate, I noticed that his moustaches had undergone a diminution:

indeed they now extended no further than his lips. I supposed he had decided not to be distinguished by such marks again. He expressed a hope of renewing acquaintance with me in Paris, and rode off. The Countess, my father, and I turned our faces toward Montoire, the Countess being now once more on Hugues's horse, which I had left for a time at Bonneval. We had not gone very far, when a man galloped after us, handed me a packet, and rode back as hastily as he had come. I had scarce time to recognize him as a valet attached to the party of guardsmen.

I opened the packet, and found a piece of paper, to which two wisps of hair were fastened by a thread, and on which was written in a large, dashing hand :

*"Behold my moustaches. Brignan de Brignan."*

And so, after all, I might keep my promise to Mlle. Celeste!

## CHAPTER XIX.

### AFTERWARDS

Two days later we arrived at Hugues's house, and were received with great joy by him and Mathilde. Here the Countess, now happily improved in health, resumed the attire of her sex, which she had there put off. My father then accompanied her to the Château de Lavardin, and made her known to the guardsman in command, by whom she was treated with the utmost consideration. With Mathilde to attend her, she remained a few days at the chateau, and then removed with her personal possessions to the house of Hugues, whose marriage to Mathilde was no longer delayed.

But meanwhile my father and I stayed only a day at Montoire, lodging at the inn there. I did not go to the chateau, but my father took thither the two keys, and brought away my sword and dagger, which had been hanging undisturbed in the hall. My farewell to the Countess was spoken in front

of Hugues's gate when she started thence for the chateau, and not much was said, for my father and Hugues were there, as well as Mathilde, and the horses were waiting. But something was looked, and never did I cease to carry in my heart the tender and solicitous expression of her sweet eyes as they rested on me for a silent moment ere she turned away.

My father and I, on our homeward journey, stopped at La Flèche and ascertained that Monsieur de Merri's relations had learned of his fate and taken all care for the repose of his body and soul. It appeared that he lived at Orleans, and was used to visit cousins in Brittany: thus, then, had he chanced to stop at Montoire and fall in with the Count de Lavardin. Alas! poor young gentleman!

And now we arrived home, to the great relief of my mother; and Blaise Tripault would hardly speak to my father or me, for envy of the adventures we had passed through without him. But he spread great reports of what I had done, — or rather what I had not done, for he made me a chief hero in the destruction of the band of robbers. But this unmerited fame scarcely annoyed me at all, for my thoughts were elsewhere, and I was restless and melancholy. In a few days I resolved to go to Paris, — by way of Montoire. But before I started,

I took a walk one fine afternoon along the stream that bounded our estate: and, as I had expected, there was Mlle. Celeste on the other side, with her drowsy old guardian. She blushed and looked embarrassed, and I wondered why I had ever thought her charming. Her self-confidence returned in a moment, and she greeted me with her old sauciness, though it seemed a trifle forced:

“Ah, Monsieur, so you have come back without going to Paris after all, I hear.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle,” I answered coldly. “But I have taken your advice and looked a little into the eyes of danger; and I find it does make a difference in one.”

“Oh, yes: I believe you fought a duel, and were present when some highway robbers were taken; and now you have come back to rest on your laurels.”

“No; I came back to give you these, as I promised.” And I threw her the packet containing the moustaches of Brignan de Brignan. She opened it, and regarded the contents with amazement. I laughed.

She looked at me now with real wonder, and I perceived I had grown several inches in her estimation.

“But don’t think I took them against his will,” said I. “I admit I never could have done that. He

gave me them in jest, and the proudest claim I can make in regard to him is that he honours me with his friendship. Good day, Mademoiselle."

I came away, leaving her surprised and discomfited, for which I was not sorry. She had expected to find me still her slave, and to expend her pertness on me as before: though she might have known that if danger would make a man of me, it would give me a man's eyes to see the difference between a real woman and a scornful miss.

I went to Paris, careful this time to avoid conflict with bold-speaking young gentlemen at inns; and on the way I had one precious hour at Hugues's house, wherein — upon his marriage to Mathilde — the Countess had established herself, to the wonder of all who heard of it. She continued to lodge there, her affairs turning out so that she was able to repay Hugues liberally. She occupied herself in good works for the poor about Montoire, and so two years passed, each day making her happier and more beautiful. Many times I went between La Tournoire and Paris, — always by way of Montoire. In Paris I saw much of Brignan de Brignan, whose moustaches had soon grown back to their old magnitude. And one day whom should I meet in the Rue St. Honoré but that excellent spy of Sully's, Monsieur de Pepicot?



I begged him to come into a tavern. "There is something you owe me," said I, when we were seated; "an account of how you got out of the Chateau de Lavardin that night without leaving any trace."

"It was nothing," said the long-nosed man meekly. "I found an empty room with a mullioned window, on the floor beneath ours, and let myself down to the terrace with a knotted rope I had brought in my portmanteau."

"But I never heard that any rope was found."

"I had passed it round the inside of the window-mullion and lowered both ends to the ground, attached to my portmanteau. In descending I kept hold of both parts. When I was down, I had only to release one part and pull the rope after me. I found a gardener's tool-shed, and in it some poles for trellis-work. I placed two of these side by side against the garden wall, at the postern door, and managed to clamber to the top."

"But I heard of nothing being found against the wall."

"Oh, I drew the poles up after me, and also my portmanteau, by means of the rope, which I had fastened to them and to my waist. I let them down to a plank which crossed the moat there, as I had observed before ever entering the château. I

dropped after them, and was lucky enough to avoid falling into the moat. I hid the poles among the bushes: not that it mattered, but I thought it would amuse the Count to conjecture how I had got away. One likes to give people something to think of. — As for my horse, I had seen to it that he was kept in an unlocked penthouse. — Ah, well! that Count thought he was a great chess-player.” And Monsieur de Pepicot smiled faintly and shook his head.

At the prospect of war, I joined the army assembling at Chalons, but the lamentable murder of the King put an end to his great plans, and I resumed my former way, swinging like a pendulum between Paris and La Tournoire. One soft, pink evening in the second summer after my adventure at Lavardin, I was privileged to walk alone with the Countess in the meadows behind Hugues’s mill. Health and serenity had raised her beauty to perfection, and there was no trace of her sorrows but the humble dignity and brave gentleness of her look and manner.

“You are the loveliest woman in the world,” I said, without any sort of warning. “Ah, Louise — surely I may call you that now — how I adore you! I cannot any longer keep back what is in my heart. See yonder where the sun has set — that is where La Tournoire is. It seems to beckon us — not me

alone, but us — together. When will you come? — when may I take you to my father and mother, and hear them say I could not have found a sweeter wife in all France? ”

Trembling, she raised her moist eyes to mine, and said in a voice like a low sigh :

“ Ah, Henri, if it were possible ! But you forget the barrier : we are not of the same religion. I know your mother changed her faith for your father’s sake ; but I could never do so.”

“ But what if I changed for your sake ? ” I said, taking her hand.

“ Henri ! will you do that ? ” she cried, with a joy that told all I wished to know.

In truth, I had often thought of going over to the national form of worship. As soon, therefore, as I got to La Tournoire after this meeting, I opened the matter to my father.

“ Why,” said he, “ I think it a sensible resolve. The times are changed ; since King Henri’s death, there is no longer any hope of us Huguenots maintaining a balance. As a party, we have done our work, and are doomed to pass away. Those who persist will only keep up a division in the nation, from which they can gain nothing, and which will be a source of useless troubles. As for the religious side of the question, some people prefer artificial

forms of expression, some do not. It is a matter of externals: and if one must needs subscribe to a few doctrines he does not believe, who is harmed by that? These things are much to women, and we, to whom they are less, can afford to yield. I often fancy your mother would like to go back to the faith of her childhood, — and if she ever expresses the wish, I will not hinder her. When I married her, all was different: I could not have become a Catholic then. Nor indeed can I do so now. Blaise Tripault and I are too old for new tricks: we must not change our colours at this late day: we are survivals from a bygone state of things. But you, my son, belong to a new France. Our great Henri said, ‘Surely Paris is worth a mass’: and I dare say this lady is as much to you as Paris was to him.”

So the Church gained a convert and I a wife. Hugues and Mathilde came to live on our estate. And Mlle. Celeste, in course of time, was married to a raw young Gascon as lean as a lath, as poor as a fiddler, and as thirsty as a Dutchman, but with moustaches twice as long as those of Brignan de Brignan.

THE END.

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